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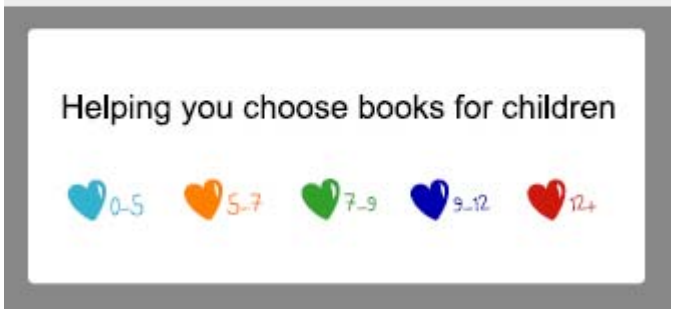

opening extract from

Shakespeare's Storybook

written by

Patrick Ryan and James Mayhew

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please print off and read at your leisure.

For my parents, Mick and Fran — P. R.
For Max and Eloise, from your uncle — J. M.

Barefoot Books
124 Walcot Street
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SHAKESPEARE'S STORYBOOK

~Folk Tales that Inspired the Bard~

Retold by
PATRICK RYAN
Illustrated by
JAMES MAYHEW

Barefoot Books
Celebrating Art and Story

PETRUCHIO: "Come, come, you wasp; i' faith, you are too angry."

THE·DEVIL'S·BET

The Taming of the Shrew

One of Shakespeare's earliest plays is *The Taming of the Shrew*, which he wrote in about 1592. The play tells of a young woman, named Katherina, who no one wants to marry because she has such a bad temper. Petruchio takes up the challenge to marry her and teach her how to be kind so as to get what she wishes from life.

People in fairy tales fall in love and live happily ever after. That does not always happen in real life. Being married happily ever after is hard work. Many folk tales are about the troubles husbands and wives have – their quarrels and the tricks they play on each other. In some versions, the husband torments the wife, and in others the wife torments the husband. Some stories suggest that being kind and thoughtful towards each other is a better route to lasting happiness than quarrelling and fighting.

KATHERINA

The most unusual version, retold here, involves an intriguing monster – a water demon or devil – who keeps playing tricks on the wife because of her bad temper. The story is drawn from a number of sources, mostly Irish, and some Welsh and English. Many stories from these countries tell of spirits, fairies, demons and devils living in running streams and stagnant pools. The Nicky Nicky Nye is actually found in Wales, and is a Gwent river spirit. What is interesting about 'The Devil's Bet' is that it brings together the water spirit theme with that of the sparring husband and wife.

PETRUCHIO

NICKY NICKY NYE

Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is based on similar stories. Because there would have been so many folk tales, ballads and broadsheets relating this popular yarn during his day, it is difficult to know exactly which version he used. Shakespeare set his story in Italy, but there are a couple of clues in the play itself which suggest that he based it on an Irish or British story. For a start, the action begins at an alehouse on a heath. Yet heaths and alehouses are a feature of the British Isles, not of Italy. In the play, the lords and ladies visiting the pub play a trick on a drunken tinker and treat him as a king. But tinkers do not come from Italy either. They were Irish and Scottish travellers, called 'tinkers' (although it was a name they did not like) because in those days they earned a living, as they moved around the country, by making things out of tin.

The main message of the play, that a 'good match of equals' is important in marriage, is something that Shakespeare himself believed in. While he worked in London, his wife Anne raised their children and kept their business interests going in Stratford. She did so well that they were able to make as much money from her work as they did from Shakespeare's writing. It seems that in old age they did settle down to live happily together.

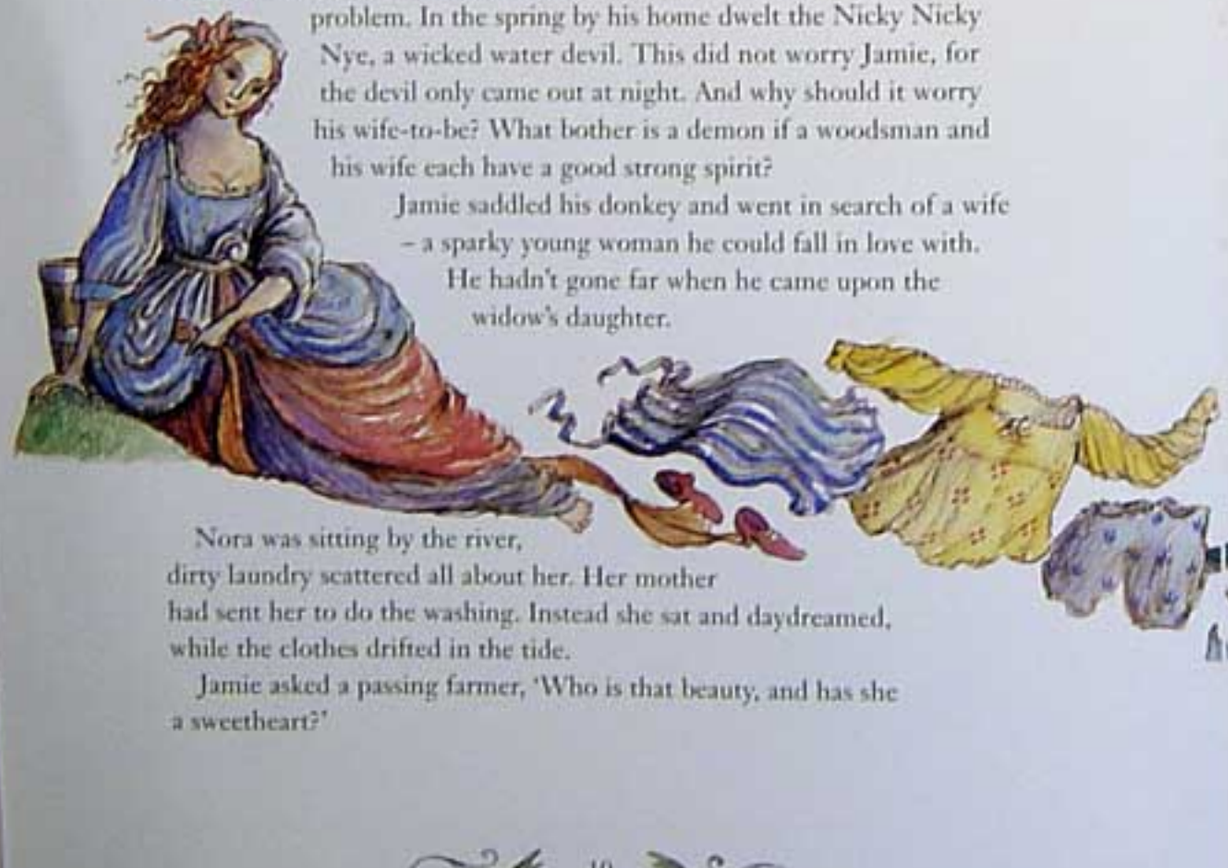
KATHERINA: "If I be waspish, best beware my sting." II i

THE·DEVIL'S·BET

There was a widow who had a daughter named Nora. Nora was beautiful, but very grumpy and terribly lazy. She never lifted a finger to help and never had a kind word. Spoilt and quarrelsome, Nora always had her own way.

In the forest nearby lived a woodsman called Jamie. He had a comfortable, pretty cottage and wanted someone to share it with. There was just one problem. In the spring by his home dwelt the Nicky Nicky Nye, a wicked water devil. This did not worry Jamie, for the devil only came out at night. And why should it worry his wife-to-be? What bother is a demon if a woodsman and his wife each have a good strong spirit?

Jamie saddled his donkey and went in search of a wife – a sparky young woman he could fall in love with. He hadn't gone far when he came upon the widow's daughter.



Nora was sitting by the river, dirty laundry scattered all about her. Her mother had sent her to do the washing. Instead she sat and daydreamed, while the clothes drifted in the tide.

Jamie asked a passing farmer, 'Who is that beauty, and has she a sweetheart?'

'That's Nora!' laughed the farmer. 'Nasty Nora they call her. No one could ever love her.'

'I could,' declared the woodsman. 'With all my heart.'

'Well, good luck,' the farmer replied. 'She's so contrary she gives her poor mother nothing but grief. The widow tries to keep things tidy, but Nora always makes a mess.'

'All the more reason to marry me!' smiled Jamie. 'She can come to live in my pretty cottage. Tidy or messy, I don't mind.' He began to move away.

'Hang on – I've more to tell you!' continued the farmer. 'Her mother sent Nora to buy food for supper, and the selfish girl spent the money on ribbons for her hair!'

'So, a woman who needs little,' laughed Jamie. 'All the better for me – and what pretty hair to tie up with ribbons!'

So saying, he went up to Nora and spoke ever so politely. 'Pretty maiden, your fine clothes will soon be washed away in the tide. Permit me to help fetch them back.'

'Do what you like!' sniffed Nora.

'Very well,' laughed Jamie. 'I'll be glad to help.'

With that he picked Nora up – which she liked very much for he was a strong handsome fellow. Then he threw her in the river – which she didn't like at all.

'There you go!' he cried. 'You'll catch the clothes easily enough, now you're in the water!'

Spluttering and swearing, gasping and moaning, Nora gathered up the garments and stomped back to the bank.

'And you needn't mind getting wet,' Jamie told her. 'The water will wash away all your grumpiness.'

Cursing, she threw the wet things in Jamie's face.