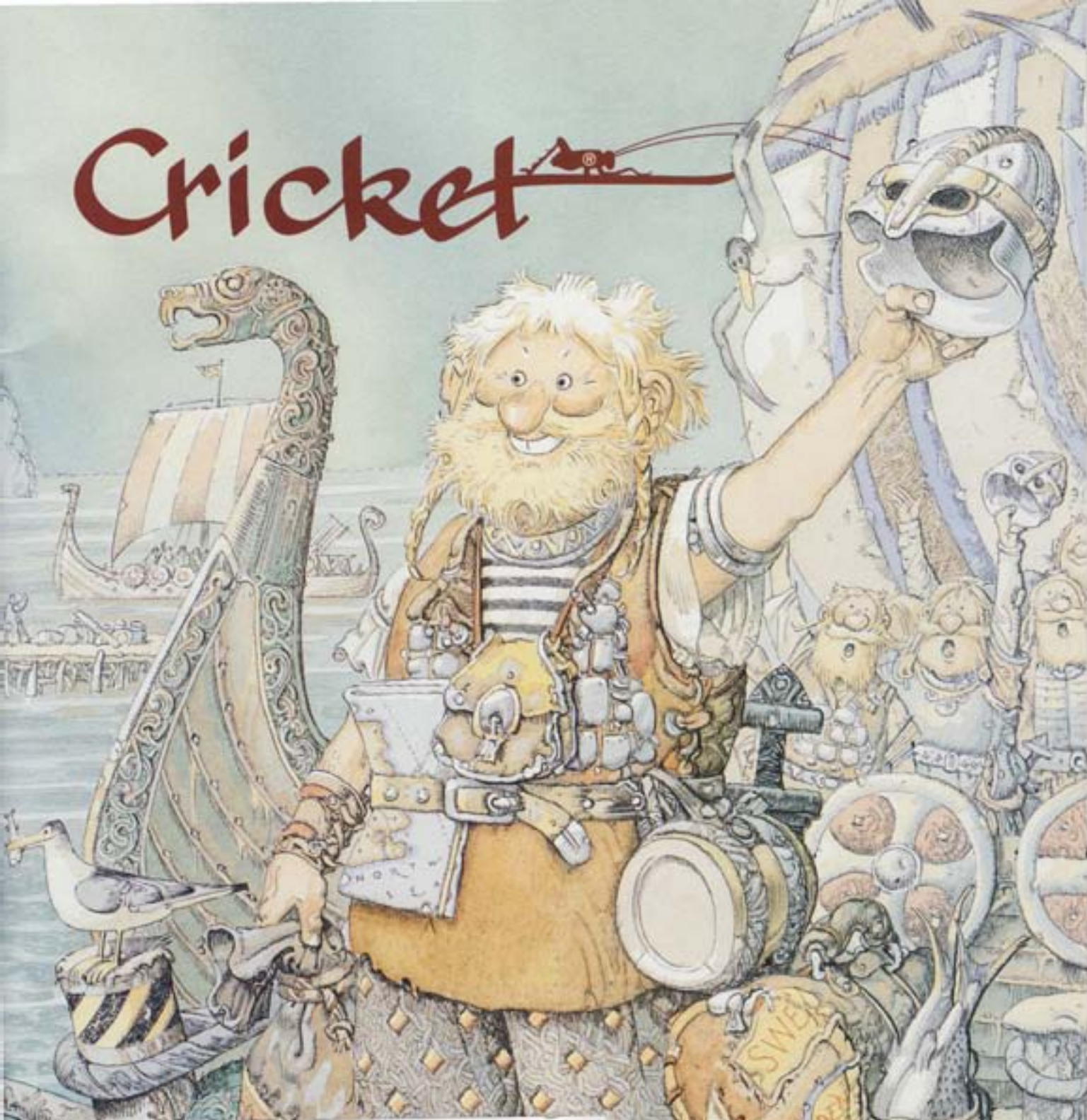


Cricket



The Pooka of Allihies

Retold by Jennifer M. Kohnke

JOHNNY HARRINGTON was a kind master who treated his servants fairly. He was also a successful wool merchant, and his business required that he travel often. In his absence, his servants would tend to the fields and cattle and maintain the upkeep of his mansion. They performed their duties happily, for they felt fortunate to have such a benevolent and trusting master.

Every evening, after the chores were completed and the evening meal eaten, the servants would sit around the fire in the dining hall, smoking their pipes and drinking ale. They would amuse one another with ghost tales and stories.

The stories would continue until it was time for bed, and the house staff never allowed time to clean the dirty crockery and dinnerware from their evening meal. They didn't need to tidy up, however, because every morning they would awaken to a mysteriously clean kitchen, swept floors, and a fire in the fireplace.

The servants would never comment on this strange occurrence, each hoping the others had tended to the chores. Never would they mention the loud noises they'd hear emerging from the kitchen in the middle of the night. Nor would they admit to pulling the covers under their chins as they listened to the sound of haunting laughter that drifted down the halls to their bedrooms

each night. In reality, they knew there was a more sinister reason behind their good fortune.

Now, the servants' ghost stories were of no interest to young Colin, a son of one of Johnny Harrington's plowmen. He didn't believe that any of the eerie tales were true. Consequently, as one particular evening's tale progressed, Colin became bored and crawled into a cabinet in the kitchen for some privacy and a nap.

Soon all the servants retired to their beds, and Colin remained sleeping in the kitchen cabinet. He was suddenly jolted awake by loud laughter and the sound of hoofs on the kitchen floor. Colin peeked out to see the most unusual of sights: an enormous donkey chuckling to itself and walking on its hind legs through the kitchen.

Colin's heart filled with terror at this most unusual sight. He hoped it was only a dream, but would his heart be beating so wildly if it were? He thought it best to be quiet and observe further. To his surprise the donkey grabbed a whisk broom and began sweeping the floor while laughing and humming a tune. It stood upright at the sink and began scrubbing the crockery and dirty plates and silverware. It poured water in the cauldron and, on its way to the fireplace, waltzed past the cabinet where Colin was hiding.

After placing the cauldron on the hook



above the fire, the donkey suddenly bolted across the kitchen floor, flung open the door to Colin's hiding place, and lifted the horrified lad into the air.

"Do you think I didn't notice you there staring at me, boy?" the donkey screamed. "Do you think me a fool?"

Colin could not find the words to answer the angry donkey, for his heart was beating wildly with fear. Would the donkey eat him? Or perhaps render him senseless by throwing him across the room with its powerful limbs? None of this happened. Instead, the donkey brayed a maniacal laugh, set the boy down on a kitchen bench, and continued to clean.

"Take credit for all the hard work you see me do, lad," the donkey chuckled. "Everyone will think you a wonderful boy if they believe you're responsible for their swept floors and clean plates. If you tell them what you see here tonight, they'll never believe you anyway. Let them think you're industrious."

"Oh please, sir, tell me," Colin began, "does this mean you won't allow me to speak of the strange events I am witnessing tonight?"

"Do as you please, lad," said the donkey. "No one will believe you discovered a talking donkey who is capable of performing chores better than any lazy human."

And with that remark, it placed the last clean plate on the shelf and leaned the whisk broom near the mantel of the fireplace. The donkey let out one more thundering laugh, threw open the door, and marched out into the night just as the sun was about to rise.

Colin stood transfixed. Did he dream what he'd just witnessed? He couldn't have dreamed the sore spots where the donkey grabbed and lifted him into the air. He couldn't have imagined the smell of animal breath as the donkey held its face close to his. What he did know was that it was time to get into bed and pull the covers over his head. Colin turned and sprinted down the hallway to his room. Who would believe his strange story? Perhaps the donkey was right.

A few hours later, when the household staff rose from their beds, Colin joined the other servants for their morning meal. As usual, no one commented on how the crockery shined or the floor gleamed. No one appeared to notice that the water was bubbling in the cauldron, ready for their morning tea. But, for the first time, Colin noticed these mysterious events, and he felt the others silently did as well. Now, only Colin knew the truth, and he couldn't possibly keep such a story to himself. That afternoon Colin chose to tell his strange tale to the cook.

"Colin, honey, you were dreaming," said the cook. But secretly, she thought, There must be some answer to the clean crockery, sparkling floor, and bubbling cauldron in the fireplace. Perhaps the boy tells the truth. And, that night, the cook didn't sleep so soundly. As the clock struck 3:00 A.M., she

jumped at the sound of the door slamming. Quietly she crept down the hallway to a spot where she could safely see with her own eyes the donkey that cleaned their kitchen each night. The lad speaks the truth, thought the cook. I must tell the others.

So each of the servants learned of the kitchen-cleaning donkey. And while they weren't brave enough to meet the donkey themselves, they all agreed to let it perform their tasks for them.

As time went on, the servants became lazier and lazier. The drinking of ale started at noon instead of after their evening meal. Afternoon naps became a part of their daily routine. Soon the servants who worked Johnny Harrington's fields felt envious of the house staff who no longer had tasks to perform. The plowmen and gardeners decided it was time to confront the mysterious donkey and request that it add to its list of chores the plowing of the fields and the tending of the gardens. Colin volunteered to be their spokesman.

The next evening, Colin waited, listening for the familiar sound of hoofs on the kitchen floor and the maniacal laugh. Mustering up as much courage as he could, Colin entered the kitchen. The donkey turned and brayed loudly, "So, you confront me? How brave of you! What do you want?"

"Good sir," Colin began, "I am here on behalf of the servants who tend to the fields and the gardens. They were wondering why you confine your services to the kitchen and do not help them outdoors?"

"All right, I'll tell you," said the donkey. "Sit down and listen to my tale." The donkey paced up and down the kitchen

floor, unaware that a group of servants was gathering within listening distance to secretly hear the donkey's tale, too.

"Many years ago, when your master, Johnny Harrington, was your age, I was human and a servant to Patrick Harrington, Johnny's father. I was the laziest of servants, however. All throughout my lazy and worthless life, I spent far more time drinking ale, napping, and avoiding work than completing my few tasks. Then my life ended. I met face to face with God, our eternal judge, and He told me I was the most worthless of idlers. I had wasted my life and must be punished. My curse was to return to earth as a pooka, a spirit, and tend to every need of the fairies in the forest.

"The fairies insisted that I return every evening to the mansion where I had once lived as a servant. Here I make amends by performing the tasks I should have performed during the days of my life. The fairies also insisted that I be pleasant as I work and laugh while I busy myself in making your kitchen as spotless as it can be. Each evening after I've completed my tasks, I must return to the fairies' home deep in the woods. There I stand idle, damp, and cold, until it is time to return to the mansion again. It is my curse, my punishment for a life of no purpose."

Colin felt much sympathy and compassion for the poor creature. He was embarrassed that he'd confronted the donkey to ask him to do even more work. "I am so sorry that you must spend eternity as the lowliest of beasts," said Colin.

The other servants emerged from the



darkness. They chimed in, "You have been so kind to us. We thank you for all you have done."

A particularly kindhearted woman ran back to her room. She returned carrying a beautiful, warm, red woolen coat. "Please, sir, take my coat as a token of our gratitude. It'll keep you warm each evening as you return to the fairies' home."

All the servants gathered around the surprised beast. They admired its large snout and silky coat as if it were one of Johnny Harrington's prized horses. They then helped the donkey into its new red woolen coat and fastened the buttons across its broad chest.

The donkey laughed more merrily and heartily than they'd ever heard before. It danced a jig around the kitchen as the servants applauded. It then did something the servants didn't expect: it bowed and

headed for the door, leaving the kitchen a filthy mess.

"Wait! You've forgotten to complete your tasks for us!" cried the crowd of servants.

"And I shall never clean your crockery or sweep your floors or light your fires again. You see, I conveniently neglected to tell you how my curse may end. I was doomed to perform my labors here at the mansion until the day I received a reward in gratitude for my efforts. Thanks to you kind people, the curse is broken. My penance has been made! I bid you all farewell!" And with that, the donkey let out a hearty laugh and walked one last time though the kitchen door.

The pooka was delighted. It was free at last. It made its way past a stone circle, released one last maniacal laugh, and disappeared forever, entering into its final rest as it left this earth. 