

Sam the Stupendous Storyteller

Have you ever listened to a Storyteller? A **real** Storyteller? Real Storytellers don't just tell second-hand stories like 'The Three Bears' or 'Little Red Riding-Hood'. They also tell spanking new stories fresh from the imagination. Stories that grow as you listen. Stories that seem to have a will of their own. Stories with a special touch of magic.

Sam was such a Storyteller. His first story sort of crept up on him when he was eleven years old and took him by surprise. That story marked the beginning of an amazing set of events. In fact what happened to Sam a result of his storytelling makes quite a story in itself. And I'm going to tell it to you!

It all began with Jeremy the dog. Sam decided, you see, that like him Jeremy was thoroughly bored. It was a dreary Sunday in September. Sam's sister Katie was closeted in her bedroom with her best friend Janine, practicing being a famous girl-band they'd called 'Boys Forbidden'. Sam's mates seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth (or gone swimming). And the TV was boring - his mum was watching a nature programme about 'The Secret Life of Snapper Turtles'. (I'd be as sick as a parrot if I were turtle,' thought Sam. 'All those TV men in safari suits poking their cameras into my business'.)

So he'd mooched out to the garden and discovered Jeremy lying by the manure heap. With his chin on his paws and his ears drooping Jeremy looked just about as fed-up and depressed as Sam felt. 'Look on the bright side Jem - at least you don't have to tidy your bedroom later, do you?' Jeremy lifted one eyebrow and peered up at Sam with a reproachful look. A fly buzzed around Jeremy's nose but he didn't have the heart to even pretend to snap at it.

Sam prodded him with his toe. 'Go on Jem - catch that fly! There it goes again. Just when you thought it was safe to go out into the garden. Go on boy! Get it!'

Jeremy whined, closed his eyes and pushed his nose down into the grass. Sam sighed and flopped down beside him. 'Sorry old fella - you just lie there. I bet you get really bored with people telling you to do things. It's

always “Catch Jeremy!” or “Sit!” or “Be quiet!” or “Come here!”. Come to think of it, people always either order you dogs about or ask you stupid questions like, “Who’s a good boy then?” or “Would Jeremy like his dinner then?” I wonder what they’d do if you answered them Jeremy, eh?’ Jeremy’s nose twitched but otherwise there was little response.

‘People never tell dogs things, do they?’ Sam continued. ‘You dogs never get to have a real conversation. Well, not from humans. I suppose dogs can sort of talk to one another, though they mostly seem to sniff. But you never really get told anything interesting by humans do you?’

Jeremy still didn’t respond, so Sam pulled -ever so gently - on one of his whiskers. Jeremy gave an apathetic snarl and opened one eye. Encouraged, Sam said, ‘I know, Jeremy - I’ll tell you a story - how about that?’

And so it began.

Sam had never told a story before. He’d read stories out loud of course for his teacher when he was younger (she used to operate a stereo system - a kid on each ear). And he’d read to his sister Katie when she had chicken pox and his mother wanted him to distract her from picking at her scabs. And he had told stories about **real** things that had happened to him. But he had never before told a totally new make-believe story.

The amazing thing was that once Sam started to tell his story he found he couldn’t stop. The story kind of **told itself**. Sam found he didn’t have to scrounge around in his brain for ‘imaginative ideas’ like he did when **writing** stories in class. Now the ideas just came to him.

Another amazing thing was that his story seemed to totally bewitch Jeremy. First one ear cocked up. Then another. Then Jeremy wriggled closer to Sam and sat up, his head on one side, his eyes fixed on Sam’s.

But Sam didn’t discover the **most** amazing thing about storytelling until after his story was finished.

The title came to Sam first. ‘This story, Jeremy, is called **The Flying Bone** and it’s all about a dog much like you and a very special bone. Are you sitting comfortably? Well here goes!’

The Flying Bone

There was once an extremely bad-tempered farmer. He looked and behaved a little like the man next door – you know Jeremy – the one whose sunflowers you accidentally broke and chewed. Anyhow, this bad-tempered farmer – Farmer Gripe – hated other human beings. He lived on his farm with his pigs and hens and spent the long dark evenings counting his money (which he hid in an old wellington boot under the sink). He didn't even much like his pigs and hens but simply fattened them up, calculating how much profit he'd make once they were plump enough to become spare ribs and chicken nuggets.

To discourage unwanted visitors Gripe kept a particularly grumpy and vicious pig as a sort of guard dog. This pig, who the local kids nick-named The Snarling Snout, sat by the farmhouse door in a cloud of flies and smiled a trout-like smile as it waited for any unsuspecting passers-by. So the farmer, as you can imagine, was left alone.

But one day all this changed.

The farmer was out on his land checking on his crops when he suddenly noticed at the other side of the field a line of people making their way along the hedge-row. 'Hey!' he shouted (wishing he had brought his guard pig with him). 'What are you lot doing?' The people stopped and stared at him. There were six of them, four women and two men. They were rather old and appeared to be dressed for walking. The 'leader' was a small wrinkled woman in a big blue sun hat. Farmer Gripe strode angrily across the field, his nose beginning to turn red with rage. 'This 'ere is PRIVATE PROPERTY. You can't stamp on my crops. Get out of 'ere!'

The old people looked startled, then perplexed, then worried. One of the men turned to the lady in the blue hat and said, 'You tell him, Laura.'

She smiled sweetly at the farmer and said, 'I'm sorry, sir. I take it you are the owner of this land?' Gripe grunted in reply so she went on. 'But we do have a right to be here. We are members of the local Footpath Group and **this**, sir, is a footpath.'

'Don't be so stupid you old fool. There's no path here – just the edge of my wheat and a few nettles.'

'Ah yes. No path that you can see. But that's only because it has fallen into disuse. We intend to open it up again to the public. We shall trample a path and erect a little stile and a signpost so that others can follow in our footsteps and enjoy the beauties of nature.'

‘Get lost!’ said the farmer (diplomacy was not his strong point), ‘or I’ll set my pig on you and on any other old nutters that follow in your decrepit footsteps.’

‘Well, really!’ said one of the other ladies. ‘Do we have to put up with this rudeness, Laura?’

‘Not for long, I suspect,’ replied Blue Hat. ‘I have a feeling that I may have to come temporarily out of retirement. I really cannot bide such bad manners.’

Gripe was getting redder and redder and crosser and crosser. ‘Stop your prattling you old bag of bones. Any minute now my pig’ll be along and he’ll make mincemeat out of you.’

‘Well we’ll go now,’ she replied, and she was smiling no longer. ‘But we’ll come back with our signpost and I assure you that - when we do return - you will be happy to see us.’

‘And pigs might fly,’ said the farmer in a rather nasty way.

‘Indeed they might,’ replied Blue Hat, and as she said this she stamped her left foot three times.

With that the little group departed, slowly picking its way to the other side of the field and the lane beyond. The farmer chuckled with spiteful pleasure and trudged down to his dark dismal cottage.

It was about two in the morning when Gripe first noticed something unusual. He woke to hear what he supposed to be heavy rain pattering overhead on the rooftop. The pattering became more of a clattering and this grew so loud the farmer was convinced that the roof was about to cave in. Then the fire in the bedroom fireplace which until now had softly glowed as it died down, began to pour huge billows of sooty smoke into the room.

Something was blocking the chimney.

Something was up on the roof and blocking the chimney.

As the farmer got out of bed, there came down the chimney the terrible echoing sound of a gigantic GRUNT.

There was a pig on the roof.

Gripe yelled and rushed downstairs and outside. There, high on the rooftop with its snout stuck down the chimney pot was Gripe’s favourite pig. The farmer was just trying to work out what kind of hooligans could have played this trick and **how**, when a grunt from the uppermost branches of a nearby tree caught his ear. This was followed by another grunt from the top of the barn. As he looked wildly about him the

farmer glimpsed out of the corner of his eye five more airborne pigs flying in V-shaped formation towards the meadow. Gripe groaned. In his eyes it was as though hundreds of his carefully hoarded pound notes were being scattered in the breeze. 'Come back,' he yelled. 'Come back!'

The next few days were the most terrible the farmer had ever experienced. He worked from cock-crow till sun-down, stalking the flying pigs, lying in wait until they came down for food and then pinning them down with various ropes and nets. He managed, with the help of a few hired (and very expensive) farmhands, to get all the pigs – except one – into his barn.

The one that remained was The Snarling Snout. If the truth be known, although The Snarling Snout was Gripe's favourite, this pig had always felt a grudging and intense dislike for the farmer. It was only because it was an underdog (so to speak) and knew on which side its bread was buttered that it kowtowed to Gripe. Now it was an 'overpig' and had the upper hand (or should that be trotter?) it took every opportunity to make the most of the situation. From high in the treetops it used its snout to push apples down onto the unsuspecting farmer, and when it hovered above him, it did the most unmentionable things on his head.

It was while in pursuit of this last pig that Farmer Gripe again met with the little group of footpath walkers. The lady in the blue hat was carrying a green signpost with 'Footpath' written on it. The farmer fell down in front of them. He was totally exhausted.

'Well,' said Blue Hat. 'Where do I put this?' She pointed the green sign at him. 'And only polite suggestions please.'

The farmer was speechless. As Blue Hat had predicted, he was indeed glad to see her, having worked out by now that she alone could bring his pigs down to earth. He pointed dumbly towards the far corner of the field where the footpath group had already made an opening in the hedge.

He even helped them to put the signpost in the ground.

When this was completed Blue Hat turned to Gripe, rubbed her hands in a business-like manner and said, 'Now then. Where are they?'

Gripe led Blue Hat and her followers down to the pig barn. This was filled with a tremendous grunting and snorting and its walls seemed to be shaking ever so slightly. The old woman stamped her right foot three times. Almost at once there

came from within a series of ominous thudding sounds and a chorus of surprised squeals. The ground shook.

‘There,’ said Blue Hat. ‘I trust this will be the start of a wonderful friendship, Farmer Gripe.’ And off she went.

It was only later that day – after the farmer had retired his now grounded pigs to their sties – that he realised one pig had escaped Blue Hat’s magic. That night as he lay in bed, he saw in the eerie light of the moon, his once favourite pig staring in at him through the bedroom window with a wicked grin on its piggy face. Gripe knew then that, one way or another, The Snarling Snout would have to bite the dust. ‘It’s pork chops for you, you traitor,’ he thought grimly.

A great duel followed between pig and master with The Snarling Snout leading the farmer a merry pig-chase up hill and down dale. The local villagers lay bets on the likelihood of Gripe ever catching up with the porcine fugitive (the pig was favourite to win). In the end, however, Gripe was triumphant. He sneaked up on the pig and netted it while it was wallowing in a particularly tempting and squelchy patch of mud. Gripe had no sooner caught The Snarling Snout than he’d taken it to the butchers.

The butcher, who had his shop in a distant town and knew nothing of the preceding battle, was surprised and a bit suspicious at the very low price Gripe asked for the pig. ‘Are you sure the meat’s fresh?’ he asked with narrowed eyes. ‘It’s not been hanging about for ages has it?’ Gripe burst into hysterical laughter at this and offered an even better bargain which the butcher - never one to look a gift-horse in the mouth - accepted.

Some days later Mrs Winkle, a local lady, came into the butcher’s shop and bought a leg of pork. ‘I’ve got the family coming,’ she explained. ‘They love a bit of pork crackling. And Jeremy our little dog can have the bone afterwards.’

At this point the **real** Jeremy, who had been listening intently, barked and began to pant with excitement. He had waited a long time for Sam to get to the bit about the dog and he’d been feeling a bit cheated with all this talk of pigs and farmers and old ladies. Sam patted him on the head and continued with his story.

Mrs Winkle’s family thoroughly enjoyed their portion of The Snarling Snout. Jeremy the dog, sensing a bone lay in store, had been on his best behaviour all day.

He hadn't gone through his customary performance of his 'I'm a poor starving dog' routine during pudding and he hadn't once tried to jump in the lap of Mrs Winkle's daughter-in-law (who he knew to be allergic to dog hair). He hadn't even shown off his beautiful white canine teeth to Mrs Winkle's obnoxious grandchildren (who would insist on calling him a 'Bow-wow' and pulling his tail).

His reward for this, at the end of a trying day, was a wonderful creamy bone with lumps of fat and pink flesh clinging to the outside and luscious brown-pink marrow inside. Jeremy drooled at the very sight of it. He dragged it down to the bottom of the garden and in an attempt to heighten his final pleasure all the more by delaying it, proceeded to first circle the bone and then to lie down with his paws resting ever so lightly upon it.

Suddenly the bone began to move.

At first it just twitched from side to side.

Jeremy yelped and leapt an almost lamb-like leap into the air.

Then the bone began to bob up and down.

Jeremy growled and snarled. Furious, he jumped on the bone then sprang away in terror as the bone bounced back up.

Jeremy circled the bone. His fur stood on end. His eyes rolled.

The bone began to rise up in the air. It had reached a height of about sixty centimetres when the awful realisation began to dawn on Jeremy that he was about to lose his long-awaited and much-deserved dinner. It was too much. All day he'd played the lap-dog (but not with Mrs Winkle's daughter-in-law); he'd put up with various indignities; he'd even played 'Run and Fetch' – a mindless game if ever there was one. And all for this. His lovely bone. And now it was escaping. 'No way,' thought Jeremy. 'I don't have to put up with this.' As he thought this, however, the bone rose even higher. In a last desperate attempt to stop its escape Jeremy leapt as high as he could and gripped the bone between his teeth. 'Grrr...that'll stop you.' he growled.

Now Jeremy's grip on a bone was quite prodigious. If his teeth had been glued to it by super-glue they could not have been more firmly fixed. In many a back-garden tussle over bones Jeremy had reigned victorious. He was, in dog-terms, the equivalent to a champion strong-arm wrestler.

So he hung on, snarling and slavering.

And the bone continued to rise.

It was only when the bone reached the height of a nearby roof that Jeremy realised his predicament. By now it was too late to do anything but cling to the bone like grim death. Indeed he **had** to cling on to **avoid** a grim death. Despite the danger, Jeremy felt a slight shiver of satisfaction when he saw the expression on the face of next-door's cat. She was obviously impressed.

His pleasure was short-lived. All of a sudden the bone picked up speed. The Snarling Snout in his former glory had been a pretty nifty flyer reaching at the peak of his form around fifty miles an hour, but the bone unencumbered by ears, snout, belly and curly tail simply whizzed through the air carrying a terrified Jeremy with it.

Jeremy became a legend in his own time. At first as he shot away across the Channel people mistook him for a strange new breed of bird. But by the time he reached Paris he had been identified as 'Le chien volant' – 'The Flying Dog'. Nobody took much notice of the bone. They all assumed that **he** was carrying **it** rather than the other way round. In Germany, to this day, mothers frighten their children into going to bed on time by threatening that 'der fliegende Hund' will come and get them. In Italy Jeremy disrupted a Papal Address as he flew across St Peter's Square to cries of.....'

Here Sam paused. He didn't know the Italian for 'The Flying Dog'. He sighed and continued...

To cries of awe and delight.

Eventually either the magic began to wear off, or the bone began to tire, for as it reached Greece it began to slow down and sink lower in the sky. Jeremy was also reaching the limits of even his endurance. The people below gasped as – all of a sudden – the bone stopped dead. 'This is it,' groaned Jeremy. 'This is the end. I'm for the drop!'

But the bone did not drop. Instead it turned round and began to return the way it had come. Some weird kind of homing instinct was calling it back, like a pigeon, to the farm.

A few days later Farmer Gripe discovered Jeremy fast asleep in the pig sty that used to be occupied by The Snarling Snout. The bone was still gripped firmly between Jeremy's teeth. Hoping for a reward, Gripe rang the number on Jeremy's dog-

tag. A delighted Mrs Winkle arrived and a very weary (and jet-lagged) Jeremy was carried home to a hero's welcome.

'And do you know,' said Sam to the real Jeremy by his side, 'what that dog did with the magic bone? Well he took it out the next day, and buried it as deeply as he could in his back garden. And, ever afterwards, he refused to eat pork no matter how tempting a bone he was offered. How about that Jeremy?'

Jeremy stood up and barked.

Sam felt rather pleased. His story had, like the bone, rather run away with itself but it was, he felt, a pretty good story and Jeremy had certainly enjoyed it.

Jeremy barked again. A little louder this time.

Sam grinned, 'Okay, Jem, That's enough applause for one day.'

Then Jeremy began to howl.

Sam realised that Jeremy's gaze was no longer fixed on him but on a point above and behind him. Jeremy's eyes were white with terror and his tail hung quivering between his legs.

Sam turned round.

Behind him and hovering just above the garden fence was a huge white bone.

Jeremy leapt past Sam and towards the bone which had now dipped to a reachable height. Sam yelled in desperation 'No Jeremy! Don't do it! it was just a story - you'll never be able to hang on. Stop!'

But it was too late. Jeremy had taken hold and was shaking the bone from side to side, snarling all the time. The next minute both bone and dog began to rise up together until they were hovering about four metres up in the air. Jeremy, still worrying at the bone, hardly seemed to realise he was airborne.

Sam's mother came rushing down the garden path. 'What on earth is the matter Sam? What is all this shouting and barking about?'

‘Nothing, Mum.’ Sam flashed an anxious glance up at Jeremy who was now gently bobbing up and down some distance above his mother’s head.

‘Where is Jeremy, anyhow?’ she asked.

‘Who?’

‘Jeremy. You know, that furry creature you promised me you would love, feed, clean and take for walks. I hope you’ve not been getting him all giddy and high again.’

‘Me? No. He’s not high at all, honestly.’

Just after that, Jeremy and bone drifted away together over the rooftops.

It was five days before he returned. Sam’s family were out searching for him as they had been every day since his disappearance. Sam had stayed at home saying (rather oddly his mother thought), ‘What’s the use of my looking for him - I haven’t got a passport’. So Sam was alone when Jeremy re-appeared. The poor dog slunk through the half-open kitchen door - an abject, pathetic figure. He had a piece of seaweed wrapped around his tail and an olive stuck in one ear. The bone was nowhere in sight. Jeremy gave Sam a sullen and accusatory look and it was days before he would allow Sam to stroke him without flinching away in fear. The family were, of course, delighted to have Jeremy back. They more than made up for his terrible experiences (whatever they were) by showering him with hugs and pats and special tidbits.

A few days after Jeremy’s return, a neighbour, Mrs Larkspur, called round with a special present for him. ‘I’ve been making some stock,’ she fussed, ‘and I thought that the poor little doggy would like this...’ She began to unwrap a huge bone. But before she could tear all the paper off, Jeremy pounced on the bone, dragged it from her hands and pinned it down on the kitchen floor. He refused to give it up even for a second and growled and tore at it in a most vengeful manner.

‘He’s a little tenacious isn’t he?’ said a somewhat aghast Mrs Larkspur.

‘Well a springer spaniel actually...’ said Sam’s mother distractedly.

Sam, now that Jeremy was safely home, began to feel for the first time the real THRILL of his discovery.

The most amazing thing about storytelling was **this**: the stories Sam told **CAME TRUE**.