

FROM THE BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF HORRIBLE HISTORIES

TERRY DEARY



**TERRIBLE
TRUE TALES
SAXONS**

Inside illustrations by Tambe

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The Witch Who Faced The Fire



1

The Cunning Man

Oh, I know. You like to be warm. Well, let me tell you, I know how you feel. When I was a peasant child in York, then I loved to find a crackling fire, watch the sparks float upwards and see rich gold, amber and rubies in the flames.



Not now. Oh no. Now I'm happy to huddle in a corner and stay warm with an extra shawl. 'Why,' you are asking... yes, I know you are asking that. Why? Why does Ardith Hutton stay away from the fire?

I, Ardith Hutton, will tell you. Children who burn their fingers keep away from the fire. Now I was nearly burned completely. Burned to ashes and burned alive. So you see why I keep away from those terrible tongues of flame.

'How on earth was Ardith Hutton nearly burned alive?' you're asking. Yes, I know you're asking that... and I don't blame you.

Buy me a slice of the innkeeper's best pork pie and I will tell you. And a steaming mug of your mulled wine, landlord, to keep out the cold. Warm wine doesn't scare me the way those hot logs do.

Now, if you are sitting comfortably, I'll

tell you my story. I'll not bore you with my hapless history... well, just a little to paint the background of my picture. There are pictures painted on the church walls. They tell the stories of the saints. I was always staring at the background, wondering what lay over the hills.

Sorry. I am rambling and I said I wouldn't. So. I was born in Hutton, near York. My mother died when I was born. My father moved to York to find work as a tanner – the man who makes tough cow leather into soft stuff for shoes.

There's a lot of filth goes into tanning, you know. In fact a tannery smells so bad the citizens made us live outside the city walls. Dad would scrape off the fat and the flesh from the skins first. If we were lucky there would be some good meat there to scrape into a pot for soup.

The skins would be dipped into human

pee for a day or two. From my earliest days – as soon as I could walk – it was my job to fetch the waste from the city toilets for Dad.

Sorry. Am I putting you off your roast beef? I'm just saying I smelled very bad. The whole air was bad in our room above the tannery shop. And they say that's what killed Dad.

When a plague came to York, it was the poor who suffered the most.



The doctors said the plague lived in the filthy air of houses like ours. Of course the rich people had homes in the country. They ran off to stay in the fresh air.

The people in the crowded alleys and shambles of York began to die. So first they killed the cats and dogs. 'They spread the plague,' the fools cried.

You can guess what happened then? With no cats in the city the rats began to swarm the streets, growing fat as puppies and twice as bold.

Then the fools started burning herbs in the streets. Vast bonfires of rosemary and thyme, mugwort and mayweed, clover and crab-apple. 'The sweet air will drive out the bad air and we'll all be saved,' they cried.

And you can guess what happened then? You're right. Fires grew out of control and burned down houses. Oh, they were months of madness.

And the maddest people of all thought they should burn down the houses of the tanners like my dad. They wanted our cesspit stink to go up in smoke.

A gang of men and women marched through the city gates and out to our poor wooden house.

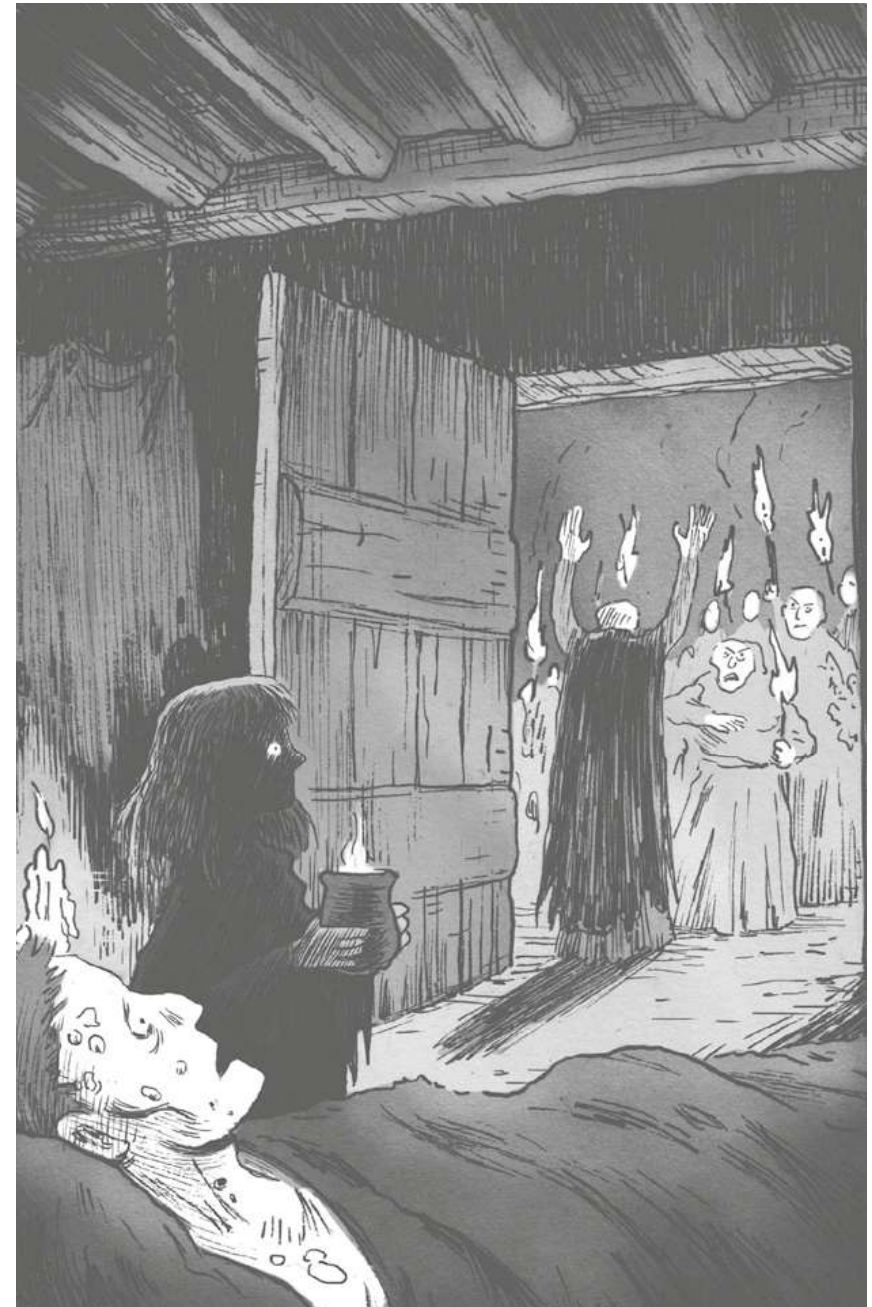
Dad would have stopped them but he was too sick. He was sweating till his clothes stuck to his body and his eyes stared out and saw nothing. It was the plague. He ate nothing and drank endless cups of water.

And when the marchers with the tar torches reached us they found me standing by my father's bed, a little girl of five. I was trying to pour water down his throat.

'Burn the house,' a woman cried.

'Burn the house,' the mad mob screamed.

And then a calm voice said, 'Have mercy on the child, you foolish citizens. Can't you see the man is dead?'



And so he was.

That voice of calm came from our neighbour. A stooped and aged man called Wilfrid. And Wilfrid was a wise man of the city. Or a 'cunning man' as some called him.

Ten... twelve... or twenty torches hissed as the rabble raised them ready to set fire to a pile of straw.

'Go home,' wise Wilfrid said. 'Last week we all looked up to the skies and saw flaming arrows fly above the clouds. You all said it was a sign from heaven. A sign that this curse was on the way.'

'We did,' a young wife from Micklegate said.

'Now you are trying to blame a helpless child,' Wilfrid went on.

'Well we can't blame her father if he's dead,' a man grumbled.

'The child will die soon enough, poor, orphan bairn that she is. Burn the house

when she's gone. Have pity, for pity's sake.' The shamed crowd shuffled off and left me alone. I was too young to understand what that all meant. I don't remember now how kind old Wilfrid buried my poor Dad. All I remember is I didn't die or burn. Not then.

And Wilfrid took me in. He was my new father. And – just like my old dad – I owed my life to him.



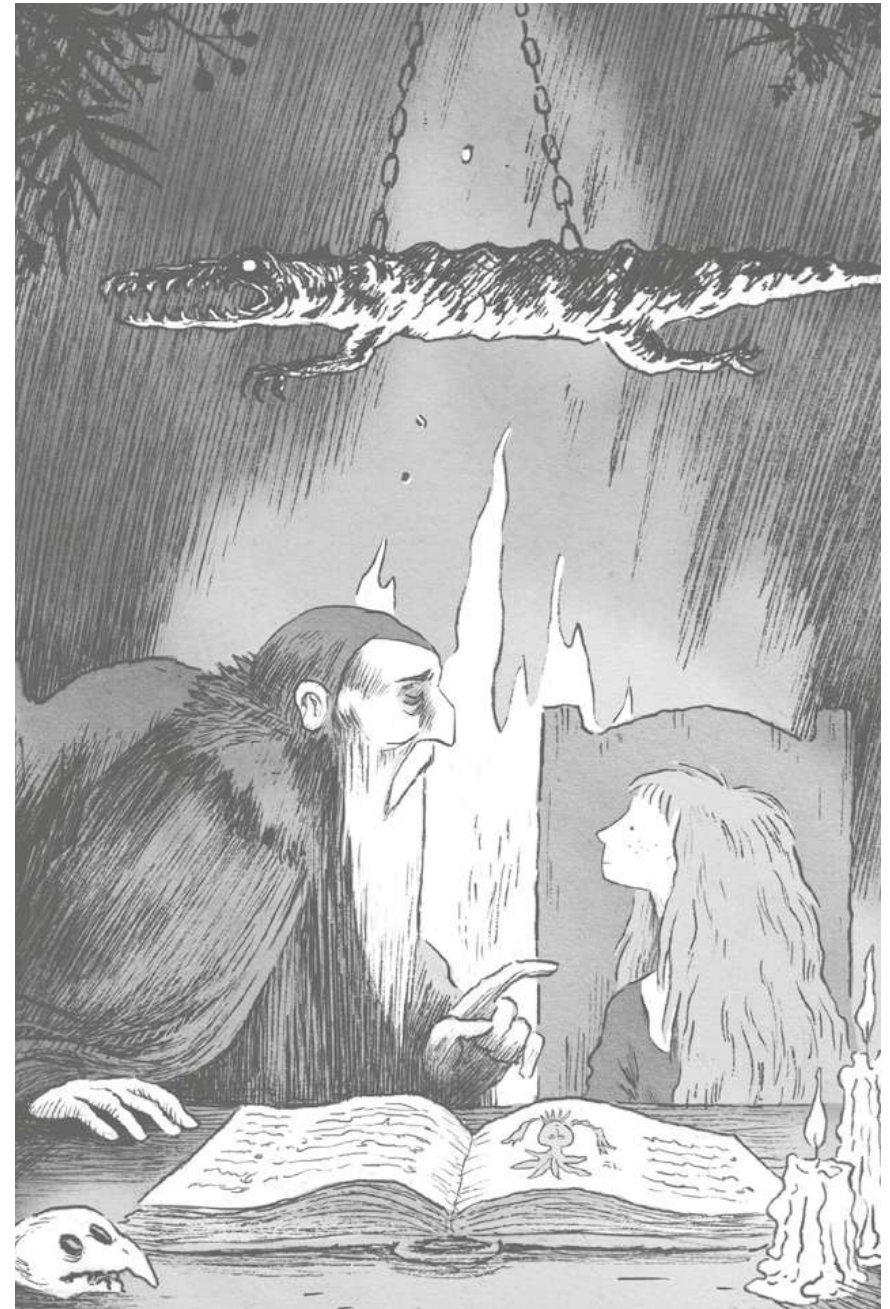
I always knew some day I'd pay him back. And so it came to pass...

2

The Apprentice

Years passed and I became known as the cunning man's apprentice. To look the part I never cut my hair. When it reached my knees I looked like a wild witch from the woods. It all helped to make people believe I had magical powers.

Every day with old Wilfrid was a wonder of new learning. First he taught me my letters, then I was able to read his old notes and recipes, written on scraps of parchment. I read the labels on the hundred jars he had in his shop.



Jars of herbs and medicines and magic potions.

I had to read every label on every jar and not get one wrong. 'Some are harmless, some are helpful... and some are deadly poison,' he said. 'If you get your mixture wrong, some poor soul will die.'

I learned each drug from linseed, mint, pear, rose and rue, to beet, comfrey, mallow and parsley. By the age of seven I'd learned them all.

When I was around eight years old I asked, 'Why do we have *harmless* herbs, Wilfrid? If they do no harm, and do no good, then why do we keep them?'

He was looking into a ball of crystal, round as a pig's-bladder football that children play with in the street. I knew he called it a 'heahrune' and said he could see into the future when he stared deep into its heart.

He looked up and rubbed his tired eyes. 'Ardith, I am going to tell you the greatest secret of my trade. One day you will take over from me and you need to know.'

'Take over? As a cunning man?' I smiled.

'No. The people will call you a "haegtessan"... a hag for short.'

'You mean a witch?' I said.

He nodded slowly. 'An ugly word... sometimes they call me Wilfrid the Witch. It makes no difference. So long as we do good they will love us.'

'And if we do evil?'

'They will do evil to us,' he muttered, but he didn't say what shape the people's evil would take. 'Now, you were asking about the harmless herbs?'

I nodded. 'Why do we have them?'

He took a deep breath. 'Sometimes people fall sick and there is no drug we know that will cure them.'



So we give them a harmless drug. If they have a pain in the head then we tell them we take swallow chicks and cut them open. We look for little stones in their stomachs, grind those stones up, sew them into a bag and place the bag on the person's head. That's what we tell the sick person.'

'But we don't kill baby swallows,' I gasped.

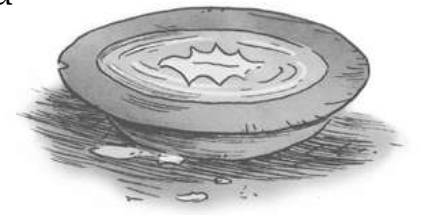
'Not really. We give the person a powder made of parsley. It doesn't work – neither would a powder of stones from the stomach

of a baby swallow – but they *think* it will make their head better, and so it does.'

'We tell lies?' I asked.

He shrugged his bony shoulders. 'Harmless lies. Harmless. But remember some of our cures work. We use a paste made of pellitory to soothe an aching tooth. Now many people don't believe it is that simple. So we tell them to do something silly and they believe it's magic.'

I closed my eyes and remembered what I'd read in the ancient parchment notes. 'We



tell the sick person to boil a holly leaf, lay it on a saucer of water, raise the saucer to their mouth and yawn.'

'Yes, and we rub in the pellitory. The paste works... and they believe the nonsense about holly and the saucer of water works. They go home feeling better... and they pay us.'

And as the months and years passed I learned the true cures and the nonsense.

And what nonsense. For snakebites we rubbed the wound with 'wood taken from a tree grown in heaven'... only Wilfrid and I knew it was from a tree that grew on the muddy banks of the River Ouse. Or to stop bleeding we packed the wound with horse dung. I'll leave you to imagine how helpful that was!

I hated some of the cures. To cure a mad woman Wilfrid ordered her to be beaten with a whip made from the skin of a dolphin. It was so cruel and it didn't seem to work. But some real cures didn't work either – even the true herbs sometimes left the patient sick as ever. For the plague there was no cure.

Of course sometimes we gave the cure and the patient died anyway. Ah, that was when the people turned against the cunning man and his haegtessan.



That is when the priest stood up in church and read from the Bible. He read the words that said, 'You shall not allow a witch to live.'

Again the fools and the fearful marched with torches to burn me in my house. Let me tell you how it came about...