

The Eel Skin Plashto

A long time ago there lived a hard-working Traveller man called Tam. He and his wife had seven children and keeping them all fed and clothed was quite a task. Tam would do any work he could and was willing to travel anywhere in the country. That's how, one summer and autumn, he and his family ended up in a place where there was plenty of farm work. There were also plenty of rivers with an abundance of eels living in them. It was a long journey from the North in the vardo (caravan) pulled by a gry (horse).

Tam knew that if he caught an eel it would help to feed his family. After a hard day's work in the fields, he planned to catch one with his home-made fishing rod. Day after day he tried, but every time went home disappointed. However, Tam wasn't one for giving up, so he stuck at it. One evening, while he was fishing, he heard screaming coming from around a bend in the river. He dropped his fishing rod and ran.

He saw a very distressed girl pointing at the water where a boy's head was bobbing up and down. Tam realised the boy was in trouble so he dived in and pulled the boy back to shore. Tam made sure the boy was okay, but before he could ask who they were and where they lived, they ran off.

That was the last opportunity that year for Tam to go fishing as he and his family had to head back to the North before winter set in.

Over the winter, Tam went to the library to find out more about eels. Although not a reader himself, a librarian read to him from a large wildlife book. He learned the fascinating life of eels, their breeding ground in the Sargasso Sea and their two-thousand-mile journey all the way to England.

He was more determined than ever to catch one when he returned to the South.

The following year, he once again worked on farms during the day and fished in the evening. He had no more luck than the year before despite all of his library study. Over two weeks had passed, but Tam still hadn't given up and, one evening, he stayed by the river until it was nearly dark.

A man and a woman came walking past with strange cone-shaped baskets under their arms and metal buckets in their hands. The man and the woman stopped and asked Tam what he was trying to catch. When he told them, they laughed and told them he had very little chance. They were professional eel

catchers and knew what they were talking about.

They warned Tam about the dangers of the river and how their own son had fallen in the year before. Tam described his rescue of the boy and both the man and woman thanked him profusely, shaking his hand and hugging him. "Come to our cottage and our children can thank you properly. You shall eat eel and take some home too."

Tam went to their cottage where he sat and ate with them. He was given a bucket of eels to take back to his family. Before he went, the woman told him to hold out his hand as she had a further present for him. She dropped a square, grey-coloured item the size of a matchbox into his hand and told him it was an eel skin plashto. Tam, not wanting to be rude, didn't want to contradict the woman, but couldn't see how even the tiniest person could use this matchbox sized piece of material as a cloak.

On his way home, carrying the heavy bucket of eels with the present still in his other hand, the brishen(rain) came down hard and he thought 'why not'. As he placed the eel skin on top of his head, it immediately turned into a large plashto which kept him dry all the way home to his vardo. His wife was amazed at this plashto, as were his children. A couple of days later, working in the field gathering in the hay, a large kalo brishen (black rain) cloud appeared and was about to soak and destroy the hay.

The farmer jumped on his cart and raced back to the farm to get some canvas covers. Tam took out the plashto, threw it up in the air, and it covered the whole of the field keeping the hay dry until the brishen stopped. When the farmer came back, he was amazed that the hay had been saved. Tam used that plashto many times for many different things and never told anyone about the magic it had.

When Tam died, some believe the plashto was buried with him. Others believe it was thrown in the river and is out there somewhere waiting to be found.

A story by Richard O'Neill

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. How many children did Tam have?
2. What is the Romani word for “caravan”?
3. How did Tam learn about eels?
4. Where do eels breed?
5. How big was the plashto to begin with?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

S

What caused Tam to stop fishing and investigate something?

I

What does Tam saving the boy tell you about him as a person?

V

Find a word in the text that means “even though he’d done something”.

I

How do you think Tam felt about the plashto to begin with? What tells you this?

I

If you had such a magical plashto, how would you use it?

Answers:

1. 7
2. Vardo
3. He went to the library
4. The Saragasso Sea
5. The size of a matchbox

S: He heard a scream from around the bend

I: He was kind and caring

V: Despite

I: He was sceptical. He couldn't see how anybody could use it as a cloak and he thought "why not" when he tried it.