

Extract from James, Maureen (2013) Cambridgeshire Folktales

The following story seems to have originally been collected by the Antiquarian Walter Rye in Norfolk, however Enid Porter recalled hearing a similar story in 1970, set in an unnamed Cambridgeshire village. The Eastern Counties Folklore Society also recorded a short variant from Balsham, which I relate at the end of this piece. I have set the story in Chatteris as a crucial part of the story is the 'bone-house' – a room where the bones of the dead were once kept. Such a room may also have been known as a charnel house, catacomb, crypt or ossuary, and these are rare in this country, but some were built at the Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul in Chatteris.

In 1855 about 20 vaulted box built catacombs were built adjoining the south wall of the churchyard on the instructions of Revd. M. A. Gathercole, the Vicar. At that time, the churchyard was full, and closed to new burials. A new cemetery was opened along New Road but Gathercole, it was said, could not bear the thought of his parishioners, or indeed himself, being buried in the same place as non-conformists.

Most of the structure has been demolished, but evidence of 8 vaulted tombs survives, close to Gathercole's memorial stone.

THE FEARLESS GIRL

There once was a girl called Mary, and she was fearless, nothing scared her. Her father was a farmer and he had two good friends, a blacksmith and a miller, and they used to meet once a week at least, for a game of cards.

One night as they played cards, they realised that their jug of ale was nearly empty, and they also realised that it was getting late.

But the farmer did not want them to interrupt their game so he called for his daughter and said, “Mary, will you go down to the inn and fill up the jug of ale?”

His daughter answered, “I will father,” so the farmer gave her some coins and off she went.

The blacksmith and the miller were amazed at the girl going out on a dark night on her own, and said as much to the farmer.

“She's afraid of nothing,” said the farmer.

The blacksmith, who never missed a chance to gamble said, “I bet we can make her afraid.”

“I bet you can't” said the farmer, “there's nothing she's afraid of.”

The miller said, “I bet you a guinea that I can make her afraid, that I can find something that she won't do.”

The blacksmith agreed and it was decided that the following week, when they next got together, they would set Mary a task.

A few days later the blacksmith went to have a word with the vicar and he borrowed the keys to the church and he asked the sexton, who digs the graves, and should not be scared of old bones, if he would hide in bone-house just before midnight, and try to scare off the fearless girl, because she

needed to be taught a lesson.

The sexton was unwilling at first, but when he was offered half a guinea for his trouble, he agreed.

Well it so happened that the next cards night was on the night of the full moon.

The farmer, the miller and the blacksmith all gathered together and played cards as usual. As the evening wore on the farmer said to his friends "I thought you were going to have a task for my daughter to do."

"Aye there is," replied the blacksmith, "call your daughter in and we will ask her."

So the farmer called Mary and when she came into the room, the blacksmith said "I hear that there is nothing you won't do, is that right Mary?"

"Aye it is, they say I am fearless," said Mary.

"I have bet your father that you will not be able to go down to the catacombs of the church, the place where they store the old bones, at midnight, and bring me out a skull."

Mary said, "I have no problem with that, I will do it," and went back to her chores.

At just before midnight Mary set off and the blacksmith and the miller looked at each other and thought of the money they would share later.

Mary went down to the bone house and opened the door. She reached in and pulled out a skull. As she did so, the sexton called out in an eerie voice "Don't touch that, that's my mother."

The fearless girl put the skull down and picked up another. "Don't touch that, that's my father" called the eerie voice.

Mary reached for yet another skull, "Don't touch that, that's my sister" called the voice, as the girl shouted.

"Mother, father, sister, brother, I will have a skull and that's the end of it."

She then hurried out of the bone-house and slammed the door firmly shut behind her. At once there was an ear-piercing scream but Mary carried on walking back home.

When Mary got back to the house with the skull, the farmer, the blacksmith and the miller were waiting for her. "You've got it then?" said the blacksmith.

"Of course I have," said Mary, "I'm fearless."

"I told you she was fearless," said her father.

"Tell us all what happened then," said the blacksmith.

"Well," said Mary, "I went into the bone-house and grabbed a skull, and a ghost called out 'that's my mother' so I grabbed another, and another ghost called out 'that's my father' so I grabbed a third and yet another ghost called 'that's my sister,' but I just grabbed the skull anyway, and went out and slammed the door, and as I walked away I heard a ghost screaming and hollering, but here I am, and

here's the skull.

Well the blacksmith and the miller they said their goodnight's and they went down to the bone-house. And they took a flaming torch with them, even though it was the night of the full moon, and when they got there, they carefully opened the door and shone the torch inside.

All was quiet in the bone-house, but on the floor they found the sexton, surrounded by skulls and bones. He lay face down, and was stone, cold dead. He had died of fright!

THE BALSHAM DARE

One hundred years ago a party was enjoying themselves at the village pub, when the merry conversation turned to wagers on feats of daring. One dared a pal to enter a newly dug grave, remove a skull and bring it to them.

The pal agreed to do this the next evening but before his arrival one of the company hid between two graves. The strong nerved man climbed down into the grave and as he secured a bone a voice growled "drop that that's mine."

The searcher never turned a hair and searched for another bone and the hidden man growled "that's mine."

At this the searcher exclaimed "Damn it, that's a lie, you never had two skulls." He won the wager.