Peg Powler's Cream

Upper Teesdale, County Durham — a spring night in 1882, with the river in spate.

TEESDALE, COUNTY DURHAM, ENGLAND · 3-5 PLAYERS · ABOUT 4 HOURS · LATE VICTORIAN (1882)

BUILT ON THE LEGEND OF: PEG POWLER OF THE RIVER TEES (RECORDED BY 19TH-CENTURY FOLKLORISTS)

Game master's eyes only. Everything the players may see is in the separate Player Pack.

System-neutral. Difficulty is given in plain words (easy / hard / very hard) for you to map to the rules you play. The legend is real and cited; the adventure built on it is original fiction.

The legend as it is told

The River Tees, they say in the dale, has a keeper of its own. Her name is Peg Powler: a water hag with long green hair who lives in the deep places of the river and drags down anyone who comes too near the edge.

Parents in Teesdale used her to keep children away from the water. Stay back from the bank, they warned, or Peg Powler will have you. The Victorian folklorist William Henderson wrote that she had 'an insatiable desire for human life'.

Where the river slows and froths, the foam that gathers in cream-coloured drifts is called Peg Powler's suds, or Peg Powler's cream. Where her suds lie thick, she is near.

A later writer, Elliott O'Donnell, told it darker. Peg lures men and boys by appearing as a lovely green-haired girl who seems to be drowning, and whoever wades in to save her never comes back. On foggy nights she is said to walk the land and lead travellers astray until they stumble into the river.

Where the legend comes from

Peg Powler — the Tees water hag, Henderson's description, the 'suds' and O'Donnell's version of the drowning lure
`https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peg_Powler`

River Tees — the river, its upper dale and the falls at High Force
`https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River_Tees`

High Force — the waterfall above the adventure's (fictional) village
`https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_Force`

Jenny Greenteeth — the related northern water hag, for GMs who want the wider family of these bogeys
`https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jenny_Greenteeth`

Content notes

- A young man has already drowned (off-screen, before play)
- Peril in deep and fast water
- Voices of loved ones used as a lure
- No harm to children at any point

Behind the screen

> **PREMISE**
>
> Scarthgill has lost a young man to the river, and the river is now calling for his sweetheart in his voice. The characters have one night to keep Annie Bainbridge off the bank and to find out why the Tees has turned hungry this spring.

What is really going on

Peg Powler is real, and she can only take a victim from deep, slow water where her suds gather. For generations the Tees at Scarthgill ran fast and shallow over an old stepping-stone ford, and Peg kept to the pools below High Force. Last autumn the mill-owner Josiah Garth built a new timber weir to feed his bobbin mill. The weir drowned the ford and made a deep, still pool below it that the village has started calling the Cream Pot. Peg has moved in.

Garth fines his foreman, Ned Dowson, for every foot of water let through the sluice at night, so Ned keeps it shut after dark and the pool stays full. Tom Raine drowned on Tuesday when he waded in after a girl he heard crying in the Cream Pot. Now Peg calls for Annie in Tom's voice. Open the sluice or pull the weir

boards and the pool drains back to fast, shallow water, the suds scatter and Peg's hold breaks. The river goes back to what it was before the weir.

The clue graph

The voice isn't Tom
Routes: Annie lets slip that the voice called her 'Ann Bainbridge', which Tom never did / Bella Kipling says flatly that the drowned don't call; Peg Powler does / The voice only ever calls from the deepest water, never from the bank where a living man would crawl out
Leads to: Scene 1 !’ keep Annie off the bank

Peg can only take from deep, slow water where the suds gather
Routes: Bella's old rhyme: 'Where Tees runs quick, Peg's arm is thin' (Handout 1) / Watching the river: the suds pile only in the Cream Pot and nowhere on the fast stretches / Willie Coatsworth has fished the ford forty years and nobody drowned there before the weir
Leads to: Scene 2 !’ the weir

The Cream Pot is new, made by Garth's weir last autumn
Routes: The old ford stones are visible under the pool if someone holds a lantern low / Willie or Bella complains of it unprompted / The mill's plans and dated receipts in the counting house
Leads to: Scene 2 !’ the mill

The sluice is kept shut at night on Garth's orders
Routes: The sluice book with the fines (Handout 2) / Ned Dowson confesses if pressed, or if shown the book / The mill boy Sam Pounder mentions that 'the gate's always down after dark now'
Leads to: Scene 3 !’ open the sluice

The sluice gear is locked and Garth holds the key
Routes: Ned says so / The padlocked windlass at the weir / Garth wears it on his watch chain, and Margaret Garth knows where the spare is kept
Leads to: Scene 3 !’ how to open it

Pacing for one evening

0:00 Hook, the voice in the fog, Annie at the window

0:35 Down to the wall, or off to find Bella; first look at the Cream Pot

1:15 Bella's rhyme; the old ford under the pool

1:55 The mill: counting house, sluice book, Ned Dowson

2:45 Garth and the key; fog thickens, the voices change

3:15 The Cream Pot: the drowning girl, the sluice or the boards

3:50 Morning, and what Scarthgill will say

SCENE 1 — THE HEATHER BELL AND SCARTHGILL GREEN

Annie at the Window

> READ ALOUD
>
> *The fog has come up to the inn windows, and the lamps in the taproom make it glow like wet wool. Somewhere below the green, beyond the drystone wall, a young man is calling a girl's name, patiently and over and over. Behind the bar, a red-eyed girl is lighting a lantern with shaking hands.*

Nine o'clock, fog coming up off the river. Annie Bainbridge, who works at the inn, is packing a lantern and her shawl. Edith Lowes, the landlady, is trying to stop her and failing. Down by the water, just loud enough to hear from the inn yard, a young man's voice is calling 'Ann! Ann Bainbridge!' The village has heard it for two nights. Nobody will go down.

If they…

Talk Annie down: ask what the voice says, and listen — She tells them it called her 'Ann Bainbridge' as if reading it off a stone, and she knows that's wrong. She agrees to stay if someone else goes to look. Easy if they are kind, hard if they laugh at her.

Go down to the bank with her — At the wall the voice gets sweeter and closer, and Annie starts climbing over. Holding her back is hard. Whoever holds the lantern sees cream-coloured suds turning against the current in the pool below the weir.

Leave Annie to Edith and go to find out who knows the river — Edith points them to Bella Kipling across the footbridge ('she'll tell you it's Peg, and she's not wrong'). Annie slips out within the hour, and Scene 3 starts with her already at the weir.

Clues here

- The voice isn't Tom
- The suds turn against the current in the Cream Pot

> DIFFICULTY
>
> Keeping Annie from the water once the voice starts is hard. It's easy if she trusts them, or if someone blocks her ears with wax or a shawl.

SCENE 2 — BELLA KIPLING'S COTTAGE, THE OLD FORD AND GARTH'S MILL

Old Water, New Weir

> READ ALOUD
>
> *Above the village the river is white and loud, and it throws itself down from High Force like something let off a chain. Below the new weir it goes quiet and still and black, and the froth lies on it like cream on a pan of milk. Downstream, where the water runs fast again over stones, there isn't a scrap of foam.*

The party can take this scene in any order. Bella Kipling lives alone in a cottage among the alders on the far bank and knows every rhyme about Peg. Willie Coatsworth is night-fishing below the footbridge because 'Peg never came this far down'. Garth's bobbin mill has a counting house, and inside it is the sluice book. Ned Dowson is on the night shift, and he is sick with guilt.

If they…

Visit Bella Kipling — She gives them tea, the old rhyme (Handout 1) and a warning: 'Peg's in the Cream Pot now. The old ford never drowned a soul.' She won't cross the footbridge at night herself.

Get into the counting house (charm, bluff or break in) — The sluice book (Handout 2) and Garth's weir plans, dated last September. Charm works on Margaret Garth. Breaking in is easy, but Sam Pounder sees and tells Garth.

Confront Ned Dowson at the mill — Hard to crack him with threats. It's easy with the sluice book or a word about Tom, who was his wife's cousin. He admits he keeps the gate shut and says only Garth has the windlass key.

Clues here

- Peg can only take from deep, slow water
- The Cream Pot is new
- The sluice is kept shut at night
- The sluice gear is locked

> DIFFICULTY
>
> Finding the old ford stones under the pool by lantern light is hard, and anyone leaning out to look hears their own name from the water. Reading the sluice book is easy.

SCENE 3 — GARTH'S WEIR AND THE SLUICE, NEAR MIDNIGHT

The Cream Pot

> READ ALOUD
>
> *The weir is a long black line of timber with the river piling up behind it. Below, the Cream Pot is as flat as a plate, pale with suds. And out in the middle of it, where no one could stand, a girl with long hair the colour of pondweed is holding up one white arm and crying for help.*

The fog is thick and Peg is hungry. She now calls in the voices of whoever the characters miss most, and she may show herself as a girl drowning in the middle of the pool. Josiah Garth arrives with a lantern, furious at trespassers on his weir. Annie may already be here. The sluice windlass is padlocked. The boards of the weir can be levered out with bars, but it's heavy, wet work at the edge of the deep water.

If they…

Open the sluice (win Garth over, take his key, or break the padlock) — The gate lifts, the pool drops and speeds up, the suds are pulled apart, and the girl in the water becomes something long, green and furious. Then it's gone downstream in the white water. This is the clean win.

Pull the weir boards out by hand — Hard: two or three people on bars, roped, while Peg calls to each of them by name. Every board lowers the pool. When the third one goes, the old ford stones break the surface and Peg's hold fails.

Go in after the drowning girl — Very hard to come back from. The water is freezing and something has your ankle. Only a rope held by the others on the bank, or an open sluice, gets them out.

Clues here

- When the pool drops, the suds scatter and the voices fade

> DIFFICULTY
>
> Resisting a loved one's voice is hard. It's easy with ears stopped or with someone holding your arm. Breaking the padlock is easy with a hammer and very hard without one. Persuading Garth in front of his own weir is hard, and easy if he's shown the sluice book and Tom's boot.

The ending

Near midnight, Peg makes her play for Annie or for whichever character is nearest the edge. The characters end it by turning the Cream Pot back into running water. However it goes, in the morning the river is loud and ordinary again, and Garth has a decision to make about his weir.

If the sluice was opened with Garth's consent: Garth leaves the gate open at night from now on and quietly pays for Tom's burial. The village forgives him, slowly.

If the weir boards were torn out or the lock was broken: Peg is gone from the pool, but Garth wants the party taken up for damage, until Ned speaks for them. A sour, honest morning.

If someone went into the water and was pulled out: They live, but they hear their name from every river for a month. Bella says that passes. Mostly.

If the pool was never drained: Annie is found at dawn on the bank, alive and asleep with suds in her hair, because the party held on. The voice will call again tomorrow night.

When the table goes sideways

The party bypasses the mill entirely: Ned Dowson comes to the Heather Bell at eleven, drunk and guilty, with the sluice book under his coat.

The party misses the key clue that the weir made the pool: Willie Coatsworth grumbles that 'there was a ford there when I were a lad, you could cross in clogs', and lifts his lantern to show the stones.

The party splits up: Split along the two jobs: one group keeps Annie safe at the inn and gets Bella's lore, the other works the mill. Cut between them every 10 minutes. At midnight the voice calls both groups by name.

They try to fight Peg directly: Iron and fire make her let go, but they don't end her. She sinks and calls again from the other side of the pool. Show them the suds are what she stands in.

Difficulty for any system

Easy: Anyone competent succeeds; roll only if failure is interesting.

Hard: A trained or well-equipped character usually succeeds; others need help.

Very hard: Only with a clever plan, the right tools or a great deal of luck.

Easy means no roll or a small bonus, hard is your system's standard test, and very hard is your hardest test or needs a clever plan first.

The cast

Annie Bainbridge MAID AT THE HEATHER BELL, 19
Red eyes, a shawl too thin for the fog, Tom's cap in her apron pocket
Wants: To believe Tom is alive
Secret: Part of her knows the voice is wrong. She wants someone to tell her so
Voice: Quiet, stubborn, and she doesn't stop moving
Knows: The voice isn't Tom (it says 'Ann Bainbridge')

Bella Kipling WIDOW ON THE FAR BANK, KNOWS EVERY RIVER RHYME
Tiny, clay pipe, a sprig of rowan pinned to her shawl
Wants: To be listened to for once
Secret: Her own brother answered a voice on the Tees in 1839. She has never told anyone how
Voice: Blunt dale speech, answers a question with a rhyme
Knows: Peg needs slow water; the old rhyme; the ford never drowned anyone

Josiah Garth OWNER OF THE BOBBIN MILL AND THE NEW WEIR
Good coat, muddy boots, a brass key on his watch chain
Wants: To keep the mill working through the spring orders
Secret: He knows the weir flooded the ford and has told himself Tom's death was drink
Voice: Loud and reasonable, uses 'progress' a lot
Knows: Holds the windlass key; has the weir plans

Ned Dowson MILL FOREMAN
Big, hollow-eyed, fingers split from the bobbin lathes
Wants: To keep his job and his conscience, and he can't do both
Secret: He heard the girl crying on Tuesday and didn't go down. Tom did
Voice: Mumbles, won't meet eyes, and gets gentle when Tom is mentioned
Knows: The sluice is kept shut at night; only Garth has the key

Willie Coatsworth OLD NIGHT-FISHER
Oilskin, rod, a jam-jar of worms, cheerful in all weather
Wants: A salmon and an audience
Secret: He saw Tom wade into the Cream Pot and thought he was after a fish
Voice: Chatty, digresses, and suddenly gets exact about water
Knows: There was a ford there before the weir; where the stones are

Margaret Garth THE MILL-OWNER'S SISTER, KEEPS THE BOOKS
Ink on her cuff, spectacles on a ribbon, very still
Wants: For her brother to stop being a fool before someone else dies
Secret: She keeps the spare windlass key in the cash box
Voice: Precise and dry. She says a lot by what she leaves out
Knows: Where the spare key is; the weir was built last September

Handouts — when to use them

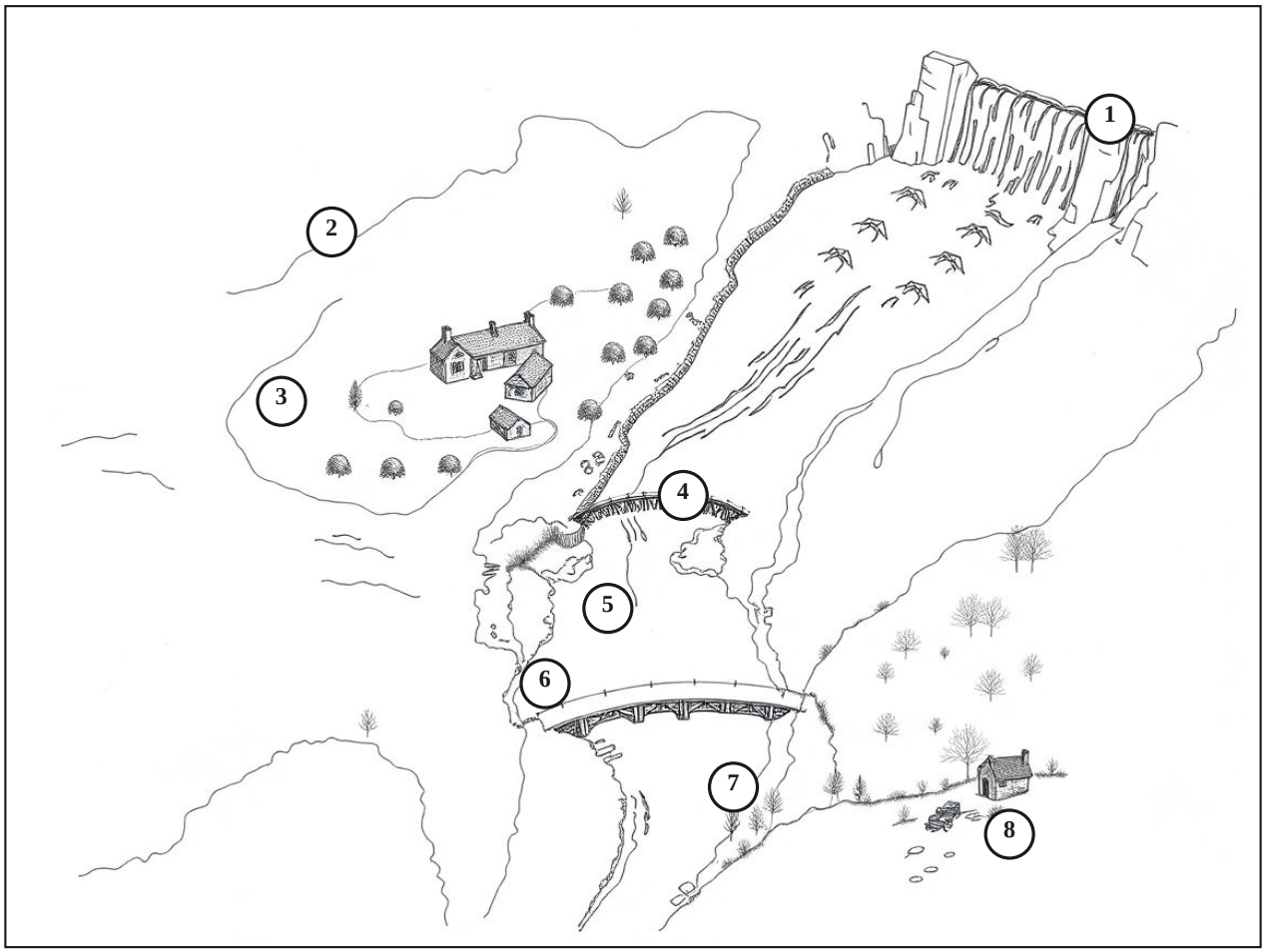
Handout 1, Peg Powler's Rhyme: Bella gives it in Scene 2, or Edith can half-remember it in Scene 1. It holds the whole solution: fast, white water beats Peg, and still water feeds her.

Handout 2, Sluice Book, Scarthgill Mill: It's in the counting house, or Ned has it on him. It shows the sluice is shut at night on Garth's order and ties the crying on the water to Tom's death. It's also the thing that turns Garth.

MAP — GM VERSION

Scarthgill below High Force

The falls, the new weir and its Cream Pot, the drowned ford, the village and the far bank, drawn for play.



SCHEMATIC — NOT TO SCALE, NOT A SURVEY

1. High Force Peg's old haunt in the deep plunge pool. She came down from here.

2. The Heather Bell & the green Scene 1. Annie, Edith, and the voice heard from the inn yard.

3. Garth's bobbin mill Scene 2. The sluice book, the weir plans, Ned on shift, Margaret at the books.

4. The weir & sluice Scene 3. The windlass is padlocked and Garth holds the key.

5. The Cream Pot Where Peg is now. Tom drowned here, and she makes her play here at midnight.

6. The old ford The stepping stones are under the pool. They show again once it drains.

7. The footbridge Willie fishes below it. It's safe, because the water here is fast.

8. Bella Kipling's cottage Bella, the rhyme and the old lore.

* * *

PEG POWLER'S RHYME

Keep back, keep back from Tees's side,
where Peg sits under, green and wide;
she combs her hair, she skims her cream,
she calls you sweeter than a dream.

Where Tees runs quick, Peg's arm is thin,
where Tees lies still, she'll have you in.
So cross at the stones where the water's white,
and never answer a voice at night.

Printed for the hawkers of the parish, and sold for a penny.

SLUICE BOOK, SCARTHGILL MILL

No.	Entry	Hand
1	*Mar. 28. Gate shut 6 p.m. per Mr G. Head of water good. — N.D.*	
2	*Mar. 29. Gate opened 2 hrs night, pool flooding the lower field. Fined 2s. by Mr G. — N.D.*	
3	*Mar. 30. Gate shut 6 p.m. Froth very thick below the weir.*	
4	*Mar. 31. Gate shut. Heard a lass crying on the water about 11. Did not go down. God forgive me.*	
5	*Apr. 1. Gate shut. T. Raine not come to work. His boot found at the Pot.*	
6	*— In another hand: 'Gate to stay DOWN after dark. Every foot of water let go is money. J.G.'*	