



Beanstalk Jack

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Retold Fairy Tales

Once upon a time, a boy named Jack lived with his widowed mother in a poverty-stricken cottage. For their only wealth, they had an old cow. When the cow's milk dried up, Jack's mother told him to take the beast to market and sell her.

"She's worth nowt. All bones, no flesh. But you're to take no less than five silver pieces for her."

There was not a drop of the milk of human kindness in Jack's mother. She was worn down by hard work and saw no end to it. Her husband had left her with nothing but the crumbling cottage and a son who used the little wit he possessed to invent ways of shirking his work. She'd have taken the cow to market herself, but then, who would have made the bread and weeded the turnips, chased the crows and watered the barley? Certainly not Jack.

Whistling a tuneless tune, Jack picked up a stick and beat the cow on the rump.

"It's the knackers for you, you useless bag of bones," he said to the cow, grinning cheerily, and set off down the road to the market. He was almost there, in sight of the church steeple, so close he could hear the noise of haggling and laughter, when he met a peddler man on the road.

"You selling that cow?" the peddler asked.

"Five pieces of silver," Jack said.

The peddler laughed. "You won't get five coppers for her at the fair. Too many fine beasts for sale, young and healthy."

Jack's face fell but the peddler slapped him on the back. "It's your lucky day, my lad." He took a pouch from his pack. "I'll take her off your hands for this bag of beans. You'll save yourself a journey, and these beans will grow

like Topsy in no time. There's magic in 'em, see?"

Jack needed no persuading. The deal done, Jack sauntered home. He called his mother and tossed the bag of beans on the table.

"Hey, Ma," he shouted. "Come and look at what I got for the old cow."

Needless to say, his mother was less than impressed and, after letting him feel the flat of her hand, sent him outside to plant the bloody things.

There was no supper for either of them that night, and Jack woke the next morning with a rumbling stomach. In fact, it was only hunger that woke him, because no daylight fell through his window at all. When he stumbled into the kitchen, his mother was already outside, having squeezed past the thick stem of one of the bean plants that Jack, in his stupidity, had planted right in front of the door. The cottage was completely hidden from view behind the jungle-like vegetation, and Jack's mother was standing, her palm shading her eyes, staring up the beanstalks that were truly a spectacular sight, climbing, magically straight, up through the clouds. When Jack appeared, she handed him a cloth bag.

"There's beans on it already," she said. "Up you go, if you want to eat today."

Jack peered, screwing up his eyes. "They're miles up! What if I fall? I'll be killed!"

His mother shrugged. "If you don't go up, you'll die of hunger, so what's the difference?"

Muttering under his breath, Jack tested the strength of the lower leaves and found them strong enough to bear his weight. He climbed until he began to feel tired and looked down to see a flock of pigeons flying way below the level of his feet. He gulped. Better to look up, he thought. He carried on climbing until the clouds shrouded his shoulders. This time, he looked up and saw the first long green bean pods dangling among the leaves. Each pod was bigger than he was, and the stalks were as thick as his waist. He took out his penknife and sawed but it was useless. He should have brought an axe.

"These your beans?" a voice boomed overhead. Jack looked up at a huge, friendly face with a smile missing a couple of teeth.

"They are, but I've nothing to pick 'em with." He held up his penknife. "It'll take me a year to pick just one with this."

The giant, for the friendly face belonged to a giant, laughed and snapped a few beans from the stalk. "How many?"

"One bean will feed me and Ma for a week, I'd say."

The giant laughed again and leaned over what was the edge of his garden wall.

“Gardy loo!” he roared and dropped a large handful of extremely large bean pods into the cloudy air. “When you want some more, just call.”

“Thanks,” Jack said. “You’re a mate.”

“A giant?” his mother shouted, when Jack told her who had dropped the man-sized bean pods that smashed the cowshed to smithereens. “Giants have castles and gold and magic harps and suchlike. And all we have is beans! You get back up that beanstalk, my lad, and bring back something a bit more useful this time.”

Grumbling furiously, Jack climbed back up the beanstalk, taking care not to look down, and only looked up once he was through the clouds. This time, he climbed a little higher until he came to the wall that marked the edge of the giant’s garden. Swinging himself off the beanstalk, he scrambled over the wall and set off along the path that led to the gigantic door of the giant’s ginormous house.

It was a beautiful early summer’s afternoon, so the door was wide open, otherwise this story would probably have ended here, since there was no way Jack could have reached the door knob or lifted the door knocker. As it was, he was able to walk straight inside, bold as brass, to look for the golden harps and suchlike as per his mother’s instructions. Before he had made much progress over the vast hallway, the giant came stomping downstairs.

“Hello,” he said. “It’s you again. Need some more beans?”

Jack shook his head. “Er, no thanks. Ma sent me to ask you if we could have...if you could give us...” He whipped the cloth bag out of his pocket and waved it at the giant. “...a bit of sugar. We’re right out.”

It was the first thing that came into his head, having been often sent round the neighbourhood with that particular request. The giant gave him a strange look but nodded and went off to the kitchen.

“Just wait there, I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

“A jiffy,” Jack muttered to himself and cast about looking for something precious. But everything was too high, too big and too heavy. He’d never be able to pinch as much as a teaspoon. He was about to give up in despair when a great goose waddled in from the garden and pecked about on the stone flags. Jack’s mouth watered. A goose that size would feed them for months!

“Here,” he called to the goose, clicking his fingers. “I know where there’s masses of lovely tender beans.”

The goose turned her head and fixed him with her beady eye. “Where?”

Jack ran outside into the garden. “Here, I’ll show you.”

"I can't be long," the goose said, waddling after him. "Don't want my golden egg to get cold."

Blimey! Jack thought. So it's true. Giants do have geese that lay golden eggs!

"Be quick then," he said. "It's not far."

They were almost at the end of the path when Jack heard the giant calling. He held his breath. Then the sound of calling grew fainter as the giant searched for him in the downstairs rooms.

"Here we are," he said to the goose. "You'll have to jump on the wall to reach them."

When the goose fluttered onto the wall, Jack clambered up after her and pulled the bag over her head.

Disoriented and panicked, the goose flapped and stumbled, lost her footing and her balance. Jack gave her a push.

"Over you go," he said, and the goose tumbled over the wall and out of sight. Jack hoped, briefly, that the goose would remember she had wings and use them to break her fall, then launched himself down the beanstalk. The giant's voice was growing angrier. He must have realised there was something up.

"Goose, Goose, where are you?" he called. "Goosey, love, come here!"

His voice had grown quite plaintive, and Jack sniggered.

"Goosey, come back. There's ripe corn for you and apples."

Jack laughed aloud. "Silly old fool," he said to himself. "It's just a goose. Even if it does lay golden eggs."

The giant's voice had grown far away and hoarse with grief as Jack jumped the last few feet to the ground. He cast about, hoping the goose hadn't fluttered too far.

"Ma!" he called. "Come see what I found!"

He parted the bean leaves and stared. Where the cottage had been was a heap of smoking ruins. In the middle of the heap, in place of the chimney, lay the great goose, her clipped wings spread and crumpled and her neck broken. Beneath the broken lintel of the door protruded two feet wearing wooden sabots. All was still except for the plaster dust rising and the beams settling.

"Ma?" Jack wailed and touched one of the sabots with his boot. It fell off. The bare foot did not move. Then the giant's anger broke, like a thunderstorm. The beanstalks trembled, and with a great whooshing noise, bean pods hit the earth and exploded in a hail of beanshot. All over the countryside, the bean pods roared and exploded, among the new crops, on the tidy cottages, panicking the farm animals and bringing the entire countryside to Jack's door in a fury.

"You cretin!" the mayor roared. "What have you done to upset the giant? Who do you think minds the clouds

for us and chases the hailstorms away? Who do you think feeds the pigeons with good corn so they leave our crops alone?" He turned to a group of burley men. "Get those beanstalks down. Now!"

So the woodcutters set to work chopping down the magic beanstalks, and the torrent of bean missiles calmed and stopped. But Jack was now an orphan, homeless and despised. He left the village with the clothes he stood up in, hoping to outrun his shame. But wherever he went he was known as Beanstalk Jack and no one would trust him with any work, not even the simplest. He ended his days sitting by the fire in village taverns, telling his story of how he outwitted the wicked ogre to tourists for a pint and a pipe of tobacco.

The giant never fully recovered from the loss of his beautiful goose and retreated behind his garden walls. When the clouds full of hail boiled over the land, dark and fierce, he did nothing to waft them away. He stopped feeding the greedy pigeons with good corn and they ate the villagers' crops instead. Hardship became the common lot, and life lost a little of its magic. Soon, no one remembered the good giant who had watched over the countryside.

When the crops were destroyed by the hail or the hungry pigeons, life seemed grim indeed. Jack's story of the wicked, greedy ogre and the clever, courageous farm boy began to sound more credible. Children learned to fear giants, and nimble, light-fingered boys, who took what didn't belong to them so they could live in lazy luxury, became their heroes. Little by little, they forgot the golden light of fairyland; the world lost its magic and became a darker, crueller place.

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