



Giant Lies: An Ogre's Tale

Mark Simpson
Retold Fairy Tales

Tell me, what would you do? Gladys at Number 27 kicked up a fuss about the Leylandii with the council; they came and they cut it down. Giles and Gillian found the merest whiff of a strand of Chinese knotweed out the back of theirs; two days later half the tree surgeons of Surrey had descended and the garden was stripped to the white chalk bone.

The Englishman's home is his castle. That's what they told me when I first arrived on these shores. Oh, they told me a lot of things when I first arrived. Asked me plenty too. Followed up their questions with the endless twitching of net curtains as I passed. The buzz of rumour never strayed far from my front door. Stories grew legs, wandered in and out of the neighbourhood gardens, idled away a few minutes propped up against shared fences, and slowly took on the familiar face of truth.

Not me. I was never the familiar face. ‘Have you seen the size of his feet?’ they’d say, hardly lowering their voices. ‘And he barely has a neck at all; skin as tough as cow’s hide.’ It only confirmed their worst suspicions when teenaged Billy from Number 33 searched ‘Oger’ on Wikipedia and found an image that looked a lot like yours truly. And they said it was me had the fat fingers!

I let it slide. Water off the duck’s hunched back. I liked the area. Enjoyed the winding streets. Found a row of antique shops: beautiful glass frontages, bric-a-brac galore. Very much my element. I wouldn’t say they welcomed me with open arms, but I’d squirreled away the odd bag of gold coins from back home. Slipped through customs at Dover on account of they couldn’t squeeze me through the metal detector. They patted me down, of course, but they weren’t au fait with the ogre anatomy and didn’t like to ask too many questions when they found a few questionable spongy protrusions up around the thigh area.

Weighing these little hessian sacks of the old aureate in their palms somehow made an antique dealer forget the feet, the neck, the leather-like skin. Not to say they didn’t still like to poke their fun. I’d had my eye on an ornately-carved old ukulele, flaunting its deep-mahogany flesh in one of the window displays. The proprietor raised his eyes – one monocle-squint-wedged, the other clear – and kept on raising them til he’d found my head (a little higher than most of his customers, if I understood that gasp right).

“You’ll not master that, rightly,” he uttered, dropping his gaze to my well-formed digits, and nodding a gesture to the ukulele.

He turned and went out back, leaving me rubbing my thumb and index finger in a weak moment of self-consciousness. There was a great grating of metal on floorboards, a curse or two, wheezing breaths exhaled, and then a bark of a shout:

“Make yourself useful, would you?”

I arced my back, drew my head under the low plinth of the door-frame. There he was, the old fellow, right in the middle of a grappling match with a huge wooden harp, the weathered yellow paint chipping off the frame.

I wrestled it back home, dragged it beside me, lugged it on my back, ogre-handled it to the front door.

Cumbersome thing it was. The sun was out that day and I guess a few of the rays caught the frame at a certain angle, caused a certain glint, and before I knew it that yellow paint had been transformed into purest gold.

Didn’t even see the net curtains twitching that time, but somehow the story went round. Almost killed myself

laughing when the tale crossed my path the following day. Old Doris from 73 couldn't help herself, nattering away by her recycling bin. "Saw it with my own eyes," she said to her neighbour, Bettie. "The whole thing. Pure gold. Must've had a hundred strings as well, at least. Must have a bit of money whatever fancy place it is he's come from." She didn't even notice me passing, even as I bent myself double with wheezing at the thought of the flaking old thing standing propped against the wall in my front room.

And that was the same day I spotted the thing in the garden. I'd only gone out to check a bit of the guttering that had come loose in the wind the night before. But there it was, slap-bang in the middle of the lawn: some sort of plant spiralling out of the turf. I took a closer look. Thick green stem in the middle of it, wound round with tendrils of something or other thick and strong as rope. Sharp-edged leaves sprouting off it, three-pronged like a devil's hoof. Bit odd, I thought, just the one stem suddenly sticking through the soil like that, but I'd have it out soon enough with a bit of spade and trowel work.

I can only have rummaged in the shed for a matter of minutes before turning, tools in hand. Holy bean-swapped cow! The thing was about six-foot tall already. The girth of the prickled spine was such that I could barely touch fingers when I wrapped both my considerable mitts around it. And when I did this, it recoiled from my touch with such a sudden and vicious sway that it clean lifted me off the ground and I found myself face down in the green stuff about a yard from where I'd been standing.

Well, I wasn't having that, so I went at it with my shovel. I'd take it out at the roots, I thought. I really went after this thing, rammed the sharp right angle of the blade into the ground again and again, tearing up the pristine lawn to clods and sods of patchwork earth. My assault was relentless. I slammed the shovel into the grass and climbed onto its shoulders like a pogo-jumper. The full weight of this ogre body hammered down through the metal of the cutting edge. Nothing. Barely a scratch on the roots of this thing.

And still it kept on growing, right before my eyes.

Sweat swathed my brow; lungs were wrung out with the exertion of battle while the thing swelled around me. Its shadow now fell across the whole garden as it reared up high above me, twisting itself in the breeze like some monstrous sunflower.

That's when I called the council.

"What sort of plant is it, sir?" they asked me first.

“A bloody great big one,” I replied.

“Describe the leaves to me.”

“Green,” I said. “And points on them, like cloven-hooves.”

“Cloven what?”

“Three-pronged spikes. And it’s growing taller, even as I look at it now.”

I shouldn’t have said that part. Made them suspicious.

“Address, sir?”

“66 Sixsmith Terrace.”

They hadn’t twigged yet, but I knew where this was going.

“Name, sir?”

“Gedarian Rivolic,” I announced, trying all I could to draw the sting from the name.

Still nothing.

“Could you spell that, sir?”

“G-e-d-a-r-i-a-n.”

The line went quiet. Then I heard a scuffling sound as the receiver was dropped to some desk or other, the squeak of chair-legs pushed back hurriedly on a wooden floor. Then urgent whispers and hushed tones. The few words I caught: ‘Griverditch...proverbial...brick...house...sort of giant...’ and then the coup de grâce from another muffled voice: ‘...with the golden harp?’.

I hung up the ‘phone. They weren’t coming round.

There was a tap on the window. I turned. It was the beanstalk.

The whole garden was full of it. It dragged its great thick devil-hoof leaves side-to-side along the kitchen window, a cat arching its back to scratch some endless itch. It was daring me to come at it again with my shovel. I wasn't having that. I was out the French doors again in a shot; had to half-hurdle, half-climb the great sprouting rhizomes which now criss-crossed the lawn like fresh jungle. I went to the shed again, found a mighty barbed prong the last owner must have left behind. This time I'd go for the jugular, get at the stem of that monster.

I dragged aside the mighty green curtains of its outer fronds, thrust my head, arms, shoulders into the fray. I tell you, the thing was alive in there. It scratched at my leathery cheeks, clawed me with talons of thorns, but I would not desist. I hauled myself onwards, closing in on the great green spine.

That was when I first heard his voice.

It started as a low whining sound which I dismissed as a fly or chirruping insect of some sort, but then as I cut away more of the pulpy green flesh and closed in on the stem, the sound of a word, its vowels elongated in panic, started to form in there amidst the thick and knotty undergrowth.

"Heeeeelp. Heeeeelp," it wailed, before a pause of ten seconds or so. Then the muffled cry went up again.

"Heeeeelp! Heeeeelp!"

I took the spiked barb firmly, my left hand holding it low down the shaft just below the level of my waist-line, and the right one clamped at shoulder level. Then I prised those twisted tendrils apart and heard the cry close at hand. It was coming from within the folded leaves of the plant itself. I knelt and peeled back the green folds like the husk of some vast sweetcorn. And there inside: the face of a small boy etched with ashen terror. If I hadn't heard the yells, I would have thought he was a corpse. His limbs crumpled out of their premature rigor mortis and he fell into my arms, sobbing and shaking all over. To think that this boy would go down as the hero of the story I didn't even realise was unfolding around me. I tell you, I would have laughed at the time and I'd still laugh now if the lash of that fairy-tale inaccuracy didn't smart at every damned hearing.

He was barely conscious as I bore him back to the house, clawing the pulpy green from our path with my one free hand. He was babbling wildly as the traumatised do, words of nonsense, patches of language that I could hardly stitch together:

"Magic beans, mother..." he muttered, absently. Then, in a yell, "Not the window, mother, not the window...I'll

get her back, get back that blessed old cow..." He shut down 'til I'd lugged him into the house. Only the slight rise and fall of his chest betrayed his living. I laid him out on the front room carpet, just a few yards away from the hulking yellow harp. His eyes rolled whitely in his sockets, and spittle bubbled on his boyish lips as he spluttered again, "Mother...mother...come quick...they really are magic. Look, look..." And his guttering cry was so horribly stark that for a moment even I turned my head, and imagine my surprise at his next ululation: "...what is it mother? It's growing...up through the clouds...a beanstalk."

The whole thing was terribly strange. The little lad, delirious and rambling; the shadow of the great instrument, falling across his face; the rattling of the beanstalk at the window panes still. That beanstalk that had somehow imprisoned this boy and then spat him out – or given him up – on the turf of my own back garden. This was a strange country indeed.

There was nothing I could do for the lad. They don't teach much practical medicine where I come from. I called the doctor. Left out the details, omitted my name. I'm a quick learner. A boy who was barely breathing. Gave them the address; a knock at the door in minutes. Should have taken this approach with the council, I thought.

The paramedic was a woman. Normal fairy-tale stuff: long, blonde hair; air of innocence; crying-out-for-a-saviour sort of type. Boy, you should have seen the net-curtains twitching this time. If the sight of the ambulance lights bathing the ogre's face in eerie blue wasn't enough, this gold-locked siren at his door was grist to the rumour mill. This is what she said (she being my future 'wife' in the stories that were already forming in urgent whispers behind closed doors):

"Ogre, ogre, quickly, talk!

Where is the boy plucked from the stalk?"

Puzzled me, that. Seemed a little out of kilter with the urgency of the lad fighting for his life in the front room to roll out some sort of poem. And what boldness to immediately label me 'ogre', though in hindsight that may have been the cross-referencing on the medical database. No matter. It wasn't time to quibble.

I led her through to the front room. She stopped in her tracks and gasped. Not at the boy, oh no, not at him. She'd caught a glimpse of the old flaky harp. She too must've heard the tales for she looked on it as though it were something like Arthur's sword of legend. She caught herself and retrained her focus on the boy. Half under her breath this time:

“A boy so pale, a boy so wan;
I wonder what he suffers from.”

This made me check her credentials. Without giving myself away, I shot a glimpse at the ID tag hanging round her slender neck: ‘Dr. Eamy’, plenty of letters after her name. She was the real deal alright, just this strange penchant for the rhyming thing.

“Is he going to live?” I asked her, for want of anything else to say.

She turned to me with an angelic smile:

“May I make a small suggestion:
When you feel you have a question,
Could you, please, the task perform
Within the rhyming couplet form?”

Stumped. Well and truly stumped, if I may use this most English of idioms, pertaining to that strange and mystical world you people call cricket. Now, here I must tell you that it is something of a fallacy to suggest, as many of your tales do, that us larger folk are a little thin between the ears, an evolutionary link between you standard homo sapiens types and your knuckle-dragging simian brothers. However, this rhyming couplet, wordy-wordy palaver was a little more than I was used to.

“I’m really not sure I can. It’s not what you might call my forte. Could you, maybe, just let me know if the little lad will live?”

She shot back (and remember that all this time, the vine-ejected youngster is lying prostrate on the floor before us),

“You will garner no reply,
Before you give a rhyme a try.”

Well, this was maddening. I mean we have some odd customs where I’m from, the occasional national foible, you know, but this was something else. These piddling couplets were one thing, but who uses the word ‘garner’ these days, right?

I stood in stony silence. She knelt, rigid as rock. The boy lay untouched before her, grey like flint.

We had reached the impasse. It couldn't go on. In exasperation, I exhaled loudly, and in a sort of muttered bellow:

“La-dee-da; dee-da; dee-dee,
This is very odd to me,
Saucepan... saucepan... saucepan... sieve
Will he die or will he live?”

Yes, yes, I know, I know, but you try finding a word that rhymes with 'live' in a language still half alien to you, when you've got a little life ebbing away in front of you, and you've had the sort of day I had had up to that point.

Amazingly, this ugly deformed bit of verse seemed to be enough for her, and she suddenly burst into action. The scene was a blur of blonde and green (her uniform) as she felt for the boy's pulse, delved into her equipment bag, and pulled out some plastic mask contraption that she fitted over his mouth. It had a thin section of plastic tubing leading from it that went all the way to a small hand-pump that she was squeezing intermittently in her right hand.

Remember this hand-pump thing. All I'll tell you here is that it was ovoid in size, a few inches in height, and its rubbery material was a pretty similar hue to that old harp peeling in the corner. Anyway, to him, at that point, it was life and death.

With the initial frenzy of activity subsided, she turned to me again:

“Ogre, may I be so bold
The boy is, oh, so very cold.
If we do not heat him quick,
The flame will gutter from his wick.”

I looked at her blankly. Never been one for metaphor.

She was irritated, as much perhaps by the having to concoct another couplet, as the severity of the child's condition:

“If we don't warm both bod and head,
The lad will soon be very dead.”

I wasn't too sure about the dropping of that second syllable on 'body' just to make it fit; not quite the level of precision one might expect from a member of the medical profession, but I had rhymed 'sieve' with 'live' so I let it ride.

“I haven't really got anything except a great big oven.”

The moment I finished the utterance, I regretted it. The room refused to acknowledge I had even spoken. Its very walls seemed to mock me. She did not even deign to turn. The rules had been made clear. Bloody Nora, I thought, and set the giant grey cells whirring again. Minutes passed – the void in my mind not helped by the knowledge that the still nameless boy before me might not have such minutes to live – as I scoured the dim recesses of my second-language vault for a word that might rhyme with that great stove that stood in my kitchen. I admit it was hardly worth the wait:

“Fiddle-dee-dum and fiddle-dee-doven,
I have only the heat of my kitchen oven.”

Again, I didn't know it then, but in the cadence of that dreadful first line lay the beginnings of the rhyme that would become my eternally infamous epitaph.

Like a shot, she had the boy over my shoulder, instructing me into the kitchen, and opening the great door of the range oven. She wasn't really going to put him in there, was she? It seemed a little primitive for a country famed for its advances in medicine. I'd learnt a few of the names in my own country, and I wasn't sure in that moment what Jenner, Lister et al would have made of the endpoint of a couple of centuries of scientific development being a paramedic shoving a small boy into an oven for warmth. But, tell me, what you would have done? She was the expert, not me. Did I have my reservations? For sure. Particularly when she turned the oven up to 180°C (I warned her it was 'Fan'). But, like I said, she was the professional.

She told me it would only take about ten minutes. Well, of course, what she actually said was more like:

“We’ll give him the quickest of grills and then,

Whip him out warm in no more than ten.”

We retired to the front room again, where all the medical paraphernalia lay out on the carpet, including that fateful hand-pump. You won’t be surprised to hear that I don’t have too many day-time callers, so the conversation was a little stilted – the continued couplets hardly helped the flow, either – though she seemed pleasant enough. She was very intrigued, of course, by the harp. Asked me many a question about what it was made of, where I’d picked it up, did it weigh a ton, and the like. I told her the truth, though I wasn’t too long away at that point from the great realisation that people don’t really want to hear the truth, particularly when it isn’t stranger than fiction. The world wants stories. Not only the children, the whole blasted population, and, boy, were they about to get one.

At first it was a hardly noticeable whiff that carried in through the door to the kitchen. Then it took on that unmistakable acrid pungent tang. I knew it at once: flesh burning. I raced out of the front room. She followed me into the kitchen, seemingly oblivious. You lot do have the tiniest of nostrils.

“Quick, he’s burning!” I yelled at her.

Nothing doing.

“The boy. We need to get him out!”

She continued to stare.

A couplet, a couplet, my panicking brain screamed at me. Whirring, whirring.

And isn’t Fate a fancy thing? I blurted out the words the instant they came to me, and wouldn’t you know it was the exact same moment the police came bursting in. Turns out old Doris from Number 73 had grown ‘concerned’ when the damsel-in-distress paramedic hadn’t reappeared from Number 66. The boys in blue must have had those sirens wailing before she’d even added the word ‘Terrace’.

And what a sight they saw:

A highly agitated ogre yanking open an oven door; a half-cooked boy, no more than a child, tumbling out; a paramedic ('being held against her will' it later transpired), desperately trying to save the poor lad; and then the ogre's words hanging ominously in the flesh-burnt air:

"Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum

I smell the blood of an Englishman."

No need to read me my rights. Anything I'd already said was used in evidence against me, and then some. By the time they added in that cock-and-bull about bones and grinding and bread (a slow news day, about three days into the trial), the net-curtainers were ready to believe anything.

Remember old Billy and his Wikipedia? Well, you try it now. Type in the first line of that millstone of a couplet that I hung around my own neck. Yes, it all comes up, doesn't it: a "historical quatrain", they call it on there. Don't even give me the credit for it, you see. No mention of old Gedarian Rivolic. And then they have the gall to note, "it follows no consistent metrical foot". I was in the sodding kitchen, you know, trying to save a boy's life from a demented paramedic with a strange predilection for rhyme. What do you people want from me?

As for her, well she cried blue murder as soon as the first policeman trained his gun on me. She must've smelt the medical malpractice suit as keenly as the crisping of Jack's flesh that drenched kitchen air. The rhyming couplets were abandoned in a trice and she was off spinning her yarn of how I'd fallen asleep and she'd hidden the boy in the oven to protect him, and he was only a poor boy who I'd claimed to have 'rescued' (she inverted the commas with her fingers in the air) from a beanstalk. By God, it was pure fairy-tale stuff, but the Fee-fi-fo-fumming had done for me, and the young lad himself hardly knew any different. He gobbled up her tale himself.

Yes, the lad's name was Jack, and, wow, how the tabloids loved him. He lapped it up. First the close-ups: all singed eyebrows and lightly crisped skin. Then, in time, the 'exclusive' stories and the Sunday 'scoops'. His claims grew bolder. How he'd visited the house many times, and, yes, there was a golden harp, and that wasn't all: bags of gold coins (this the only truth) lay around "like confetti", and he'd even managed to snaffle a golden egg he'd found lying around in the front room. And here I guffawed more than ever: a picture of the beaming scoundrel, and in his hand? only the yellow hand-pump that had helped to save his life! Disconnected now, of course, from the little plastic mask, touched-up no doubt on photoshop and given that 'unmistakable' sheen.

As for me, my punishment was a symbolic one. Like some modern-day Guy Fawkes, they made me scale the mighty beanstalk that had now outstripped my garden, torn through the adjoining hedges, and towered above Sixsmith Terrace. Looking down, I could see them all, the joy on their faces as the outsider climbed his gallows. And there was dear little Jack, the ceremonial axe they'd given him glinting in the morning sun. They'd had a team of chainsaw men going at the mighty stem through the night, but they didn't tell that to the gathered masses; it wouldn't have fitted the narrative. All they saw was the little lad approach the gargantuan plant, undaunted, and with one fell swoop he brought it crashing down, and with it the dreadful grotesquery that would have had him dead.

The morning papers carried it in glorious technicolour: the axe, the boy, the vivid green of the plant, and the ridiculous giant oaf who'd try to take one of theirs, lying crumpled on the ground.

"FEE-FI-FO-SCUM!" screamed the headline.

Don't believe everything you read.

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