



The Legend of Jack o'lantern

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Magic, Retold Fairy Tales, Supernatural

Throughout the whole wide world, there have been very few folk who can claim to have had a similar reputation to the infamous Stingy Jack, that being of the most dishonest and outright despicable deceiver that even the Devil himself revered. But who -you might ask- is Stingy Jack and whatever ill deeds did he perform to deserve such a name and foul reputation? I shall indulge you then to the misdeeds of Stingy Jack, but I warn ye all: 'tis a dark tale of old and through the mists of time, Jack has passed into legend as his life was deepened in lies and deceits to such a degree that no living soul could tell ye whether 'twas true or not. So, light up your Jack o'lantern and prepare to dive into the mystical realm that is the past when everything seemed possible.

Our story commences in the well-known island of Ireland hundreds of years ago, perhaps even a thousand, for no one knows exactly when. Jack would seem in a glance an ordinary Irishman, but his reputation preceded him, for he was known across the land as a cunning scoundrel and a manipulator; hence, folk were warned never to put their trust on him. Nevertheless, Jack always managed to get his way. Now, one would have thought that Jack was an evil genius, and he could have easily used his talents to earn some coin or gain power amongst others. Do not be deceived though, for the only thing he cared about was a cupful of ale. In other words, he wished for nothing more or less than to be drunk and merry from sunrise till well into the night.

There came a night when a mysterious hooded figure was in an alehouse where Stingy Jack was often seen. 'Twas none but the Devil, who silently haunted the wicked, and happened to eavesdrop on a conversation that most intrigued him.

'Stingy Jack was here, you know!' said the unkempt innkeeper. 'Owes me money fer ages but I can't get 'im to pay me back, see. Always drinks fer free. Drives me mental, he does.'

'Whyever should you let 'im?' asked another man whose beard was drenched in spilt ale.

'Dunno, do I?' the innkeeper said clearly annoyed. 'All I know is this: every time that piece of shit comes up with a far-fetchin' lie 'bout why he can't pay and fer some reason I let 'im. I half-believe his excuses, truth be told. God knows why!'

'Aye!' agreed the other man. 'All Ireland knows Stingy ol' Jack is a deceiver, but the alehouses still giv 'im free ale wherever he goes, fer he always convinces them. Methinks Stingy Jack's got the Devil's own power of deception,' the man suggest-ed.

The Devil thought long and hard, for he had not heard before for another creature but himself that possessed this kind of power. Like Stingy Jack, the Devil always found a way to trick people to do his bidding; they often suspected he lied but an unseen power led them to believe him at the end, nonetheless.

Thus, the Devil decided to travel across Ireland to establish whether what he had heard that night was genuine or simply an exaggeration of mortal beliefs and superstitions. However, to his great discontent, he soon came to realise that the so-called Stingy Jack had to have some sort of power for there was no alehouse he did not visit that Jack was not known for his dishonesty and trickery. Hence, there was but one thing the Devil could do: seek Stingy Jack and trick him to divulge his true power, after which the Devil could claim his soul forever, for he could not permit any other being to uphold a more foul reputation than himself.

The Devil searched for Jack for many a night and eventually, he found him roaming around the alehouses of a sleepy town in the heartland of Ireland. Initially, he spied on him for a little while, wanting to take the first impressions before revealing himself, and he was shocked to see that Jack seemed as insignificant as any other mortal. He was a middle-aged white-haired man with ragged clothes. Jack was holding a cup of ale on his hand and was walking aimlessly, and as his poor balance suggested he was drunk.

The Devil, deciding that it was time to reveal himself, snapped his bony, long-nailed fingers and made his skeletal body visible. 'Halt!' he cried to Jack who im-mediately jumped frightened spilling his ale all over his already dirty clothes.

'W-who the D-Devil are y-you?' Jack stuttered.

'Well, right you are with the first guess, Jack!' answered the Devil, smiling malevolently.

'H-how d-do you know me name?' Jack asked.

'But why everybody in Ireland does, Stingy Jack.'

'I've no money to give you. Leave me be! Tell yer master I'll return his loan when I may,' said Jack who thought that someone whom he owed money had sent the Devil to demand his loan back.

'Nobody sent me, Jack! 'Tis simply your time to come with me,' the Devil explained plainly and with a slow movement of his hand, he removed his hood to expose his ruddy face. His forehead was horned, and his eyes were yellow and vertical like a cat's, whilst his chin was shadowed by a pointy goatee.

'NAY, NAY, my Lord of Darkness!' cried Jack in protest. 'Me time's not up! I've still many things to do in this mortal life. I beg you, don't damn me; not just yet.'

'Whyever not, Jack? Pray tell! For the way I see it you've been a despicable man for over forty years in this world; going out and about deceiving and tricking everyone in your way. Folk have gone as far as to suggest that you've got my powers... I must say, I'm impressed by your dishonesties and misdeeds, but I cannot let you live knowing that you shall continue usurping my reputation as the Lord of Mischief and Deception. 'Tis time to follow me to Hell to receive your punishment for a lifetime of sins.'

'Alas!' said Jack miserably. 'I shan't say I didn't expect that day to be coming soon... But I beg you, oh Dark Lord. Allow me one last cup of ale so I may depart this world a little happier.'

The Devil considered Jack's request for some time. What harm would it do to let him have one last drink? He was, after all, going to spend an eternity in Hell. 'So be it!' agreed the Devil eventually. 'However, I shall accompany you to the alehouse to make sure you'll play no trick on me.'

'By all means, come!'

Hence, the two of them proceeded in the local alehouse, but not before the Devil had put his hood back on, snapped his fingers and become invisible to mortals again.

Once in the alehouse, Jack drank one cup of ale after the other until he fell on the floor unconscious. The Devil looked at him thinking that this pathetic little man did not deserve his reputation. 'Com' on, Jack!' he spoke loudly, knowing only he could hear him. Jack was motionless. Then surprisingly, a stocky, authoritative man came to Jack's aid and attempted to revive him. 'Damn you, Jack! You aren't dying before you pay up yer bill.'

The Devil laughed silently, and with a click of his fingers, he revived Jack who looked as lost as ever.

'Ah! Next time! I'll pay you next time, I give you me word!' Jack muffled.

'See now, I've had enough of that!' cried the stocky man. 'You'll pay up now or I'll break every bone in yer body!'

Jack turned his gaze at the Devil and said: 'Oh, help me, please help me! Lend me some coin,'

'I've no use for mortal coin,' the Devil mocked him.

'Then transform yerself into one,' suggested Jack boldly.

The stocky man who could not see the Devil thought that Jack had the audacity to ask him for another loan. Thus, he grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and started punching him hard on the face, splitting his flesh and shuttering his rotten teeth.

'Why. Will. You. Not. Help. Me?' Jack spoke every word individually through the strikes he was receiving.

'Thought. You. Were. Lying! You. Are. Not. The. Devil,' he added through his now swollen and bloody mouth.

Insulted as he was, the Devil spoke in a deep terrifying voice: 'Oh, I shall show you how powerful I am, Stingy Jack!' And with another snap of his fingers, he immediately transformed into a golden coin, which was perhaps worth more than the alehouse itself as an establishment. As the Devil-Coin fell with a clang on the floor, Jack reached out his hand and grabbed it putting it straight in his pocket; then he shoved the stocky man, kicked him on the crotch and ran for his life...

In the meantime, whilst Jack was racing like a well-trained steed, the Devil-Coin was repeatedly trying and failing to transform back into his normal form. To make matters even worse, the Devil had started feeling a strong sensation of burning -not like the heat in Hell, for that did not affect him- but a rather different kind of heat, the one he experienced when coming in close proximity or physical contact with a crucifix...

'AHHHH!!!' the Devil yelled from the inside of Jack's pocket, as he realised that he occupied the same space

with a wooden crucifix. 'Curse you! Curse you to Hell, Stingy Jack! Release me! Release me at once, I say!'

Jack, who had now come to a halt, satisfied he had reached a safe distance from the alehouse, took his hand in his pocket and removed both the Devil-Coin and the crucifix. Then, he turned his head and vomited violently on the muddy ground, for his stomach was no more capable of withholding the excessive amount of alcohol he had consumed. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he raised the Devil-Coin at eye level and spoke to it: 'Bet you didn't expect me to outsmart you, did you, now? Oh, mighty Devil!' he said sarcastically.

'You despicable mortal, you shall burn in the cauldrons of Hell for all eternity!' the Devil's feeble voice was heard from the coin.

Stingy Jack laughed out loud, gaping his remaining bloody teeth and releasing his foul breath. 'The way I see it, you aren't in a position of making threats. I, thus, propose this: you promise to grant me ten years of life in this world before you claim my soul, and then I shall free you. What say you?'

The Devil had found himself in a tight corner and had to admit defeat to the cunning of Stingy Jack. 'So, it shall be, Jack! I swear that I'll leave you in peace to drink yourself to death for another ten years. But when the time comes, beware you despicable scoundrel, you shall pay for your sins.'

'Hooray!' cried Jack and tossed the coin away into the darkness, letting the Devil transform back into his former self.

Ten years might seem a long time to a mortal's life, but for the Lord of Hell, 'tis not. So, the Devil bade his time. Jack, on the other hand, did not change his ways of life at the slightest; he continued to be the same obnoxious, dishonest rascal; tricking folk into giving him free goods, especially ale.

Exactly ten years on the day that Jack had struck his deal, the Devil appeared to him in the darkness of the night, once more demanding the submission of his soul. This time, he had promised to himself that he would take no detours and shall not allow Jack to hoodwink him.

'Oh, how is it already time to depart this vain life?' bemoaned Jack. He was sitting on the ground, his back leaning on a very tall apple tree.

'Now, now! I'll accept no excuses this time. Drink your last sip of ale and let us go,' urged the Devil.

As Jack drained his cup and smacked his lips trying to savour every last drop of his favourite substance in the

world, he gazed at the Devil's yellow eyes and said: 'Will you not allow me one last meal, oh Malevolent Lord?'

'Nay!' said the Devil categorically. 'We're not doing this again, Jack. You shall not trick me this time around. No more visits to the alehouse.'

'Oh, how misunderstood a character am I?' spoke Jack dramatically. 'I only meant for a bite of those delicious-looking apples.'

The Devil narrowed his eyes suspiciously. 'I see no apples hanging from this tree,' he countered looking up.

'But there's some at the very top branches. There, you see? Alas, I'm mortal and cannot climb so high,' Jack indicated.

'Not to mention too drunk to do anything worthwhile,' muttered the Devil exasperated. 'So be it, I shall fetch you an apple to satisfy your hunger but then we must go. No more favours,' he pointed out. He was not even sure why he had agreed to that but thought that no harm could possibly come by an innocent fruit.

Thus, with a whoosh of his black cloak, he found himself effortlessly at the top of the tree picking apples.

However, as he was ready to climb back down, he glimpsed Jack at the foot of the tree making mischief.

'Whatever are you doing?'

Apparently, Jack had been busy planting wooden crosses around the base of the tree, therefore entrapping the Devil. 'Ha, ha, ha!' Jack laughed coldly. 'Now, hear me, oh, Lord of Darkness, for this shall be our last encounter.'

The Devil was fuming, for he could not believe he had been deceived yet again. How could he be so foolish? It was clear to him now that Jack had been planning this all long. In fact, it seemed that he had been waiting for the Devil to find him on that particular tree so he could set his trap. Even at this height, he could feel the unbearable heat the crosses were producing. If he was not careful, this could be the end of him.

'You know, for a drunkard, you've certainly got some sharp wits, Jack! I'll give you that! So, what is it to be this time? Another ten years?'

'Nay, you're mistaken!' Jack started and smiled sardonically pausing for a few seconds to relish the genius of his plan. 'If you want your freedom back, then you shall have to promise neither ever to haunt me nor claim my soul, or in any other way lead me to the fiery cauldrons of Hell.'

The Devil sighed, then nodded. 'I vow this to you, Jack, never to let you cross the Black Gates and enter the realm of Hell!'

Jack hesitated for a moment thinking that the Devil had agreed too easily to his demands, but he waved this thought away. 'Brilliant!' he said and started removing the crosses from the ground so as to allow the Devil to come down from the tree. Unfortunately for Jack though, he was too busy to notice the sneer in the Devil's lips...

Several years passed, and Jack lived the same old life as ever. The Devil never bothered him again and thus, Jack considered himself invincible. He travelled across the country, from small villages to major towns, recounting his adventures and triumphs against the Lord of Hell. 'If I can beat the Devil himself, well, perhaps I may not ever die!' he kept bragging to whoever would listen.

Alas, decades of heavy drinking finally took their toll on Jack's already poor health. Hence, on the cold autumn night of the thirty-first of October, as Jack was returning home from the alehouse, he suddenly fell on the cold ground face down never to rise as a mortal man ever again.

Shortly afterwards, Stingy Jack's soul withdrew from his dead body like vapours on a misty morrow. Looking down with a sad smile at himself, he floated into thin air and flew upwards into the sky in the direction of Heaven, where surely, they must expect him, for a quick-witted man such as himself he ought to have a place in paradise.

As he penetrated the clouds and approached the Gates of Heaven, Jack was stopped at the doorstep by a blindingly bright figure who spoke with a booming voice: 'Begone, you scoundrel! You have no place here. You desecrate and insult angels and immortal pure souls alike with your presence.'

Jack, being bold and insolent as ever, answered back: 'And who might you be, pray tell?'

'Your judgement!' said the figure and with a motion of his hand, Jack lost the ability to float and suddenly found himself falling, feeling heavy and solid as a brick.

Jack yelled and cried but no one could help him avoid the inevitable and imminent impact with the ground.

‘Hang on!’ he said to himself. ‘This cannot possibly hurt me, I’m already dead!’ Nevertheless, moments later Jack hit the ground with a resounding force. Feeling pain on every inch of his body, he sensed his non-existing bones being crushed, saw his transparent body bleeding under his dirty tunic, whilst his head was throbbing unbearably. But that was not the end, for Jack’s tormenting soul did not stop there, but rather dug deep into the underground until it finally reached the Earth’s fiery core and the Gates of Hell.

‘Well, I suppose it’ll be better here than nowhere,’ he muttered trying to convince himself; although he was so frightened of what lied behind those doors that he would have certainly pissed his britches had he possessed a solid body and parts. Despite his apprehension, he rose from the ground still aching all over and knocked at the intimidating massive black doors. Once in contact with them, his hand was instantly aflame. He shrieked in pain until finally, the Devil appeared at the Black Gates.

‘Well if it isn’t Stingy Jack!’ he said sarcastically taking pleasure in Jack’s agony.

‘Oh, mighty Devil, I beg you! Allow me entrance to your realm, for I have no other place to go... My mortal body has failed me and perished, and God has rejected me,’ pleaded Jack through tears of pain.

‘But why, we had an agreement, Jack. Have you forgotten our pact?’ argued the Devil. ‘I am never to let you into Hell or claim your soul. Ever! In all eternity!’ he added emphasising the last word. ‘You do not belong here!’

At last, the moment of the Devil’s triumph had arrived for he had long been waiting for Jack to pay the ultimate price for his sins. Upon his eagerness to outwit the Devil and escape the clutches of punishment, Stingy Jack had unknowingly set in motion his own doom. This had been the reason why the Devil had so easily accepted his terms when trapped on top of the apple tree. He knew Jack, once dead, would never be admitted into Heaven but, in accordance with their agreement, nor would he be in Hell. There could be no bigger punishment for Jack’s lifetime of sins and dishonesty than the fate that was now staring straight at him. Wandering between the planes of life and death forever, not belonging anywhere.

‘But what am I to do?’ Jack said desperately falling on his knees, his hands clasped together beseeching the Devil to help him somehow.

‘I’ll tell you what, Jack! Follow me!’ the Devil said and grabbing Jack’s ghostly hand, he guided him back to the surface of the Earth.

The two of them came to rest next to a turnip patch, in a farm not far off from where Jack had exhaled his last

breath. Then the Devil unrooted one of the largest turnips and proceeded in carving it methodically with his knife-sharp fingernails. When he finished, the turnip was hollow on the inside and two scary eyes and a fanged mouth could be seen on the outside. Next, he blew inside it lighting the turnip with an everlasting ember. 'This is for you, Jack!'

'Whatever am I supposed to do with a turnip lantern?' Jack enquired puzzled.

'From this night on, you shall be known as Jack of the lantern,' the Devil explained sneering. 'And this lantern, here, shall serve as a warning for the mortals you will come across with on your endless journeys, so as nobody may trust you ever again. Every living man, woman or child shall know your despicable name and when laying eyes on your ghostly presence shall run away in safety; far from you. You are doomed, Jack. Fated to wander the Earth aimlessly forever with no rest. Condemned to be unwanted by both the living and the dead,' elaborated the Devil who had, at long last, taken his revenge on Jack.

Jack lowered his head in submission and grabbed the lantern which would now be his only companion. Ever since that Halloween night, Jack o'lantern's spectre has been roaming the Earth, eager to trick unknowing folk away from their safe paths, but his lit lantern, which he seems unable to get rid of, acts as a warning for his tainted dishonest soul.

On Halloween night,

beware of the twinkling light.

Tis neither to trust nor to approach,

for Stingy Jack might be around to encroach.

And through the mists of the unknown,

he plans mischief and trickery alone.

But an eerie lantern does he hold,

which warns all against him, we're told.

Nowadays, Jack o'lanterns pumpkins may be,

but back then turnips they used to be.

And folk carved and lit them bright,

to scare away Stingy old Jack without a fight.

Alas for Jack, he's still out there,
wandering the lands with remorse and despair.
Repenting for his sins that brought him to this state,
and seeking salvation for his miserable fate.

The End

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