The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales. Ed. Maria Tatar. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002.

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JACK AND THE BEANSTALK[1]

Joseph Jacobs

The quintessential British folktale, "Jack and the Beanstalk" replays a conflict familiar from the stories of Odysseus and the Cyclops, David and Goliath, Tom Thumb and the ogre. The weak, but shrewd, Jack manages to defeat a dim-witted giant, acquire his wealth, and return home triumphant. While this story is widely disseminated in England and its former colonies, it had few analogues in other lands, though it has now taken root in many cultures. No single authoritative text for "Jack and the Beanstalk" has evolved to establish itself as the master narrative from which all other variants derive. Instead, there are a number of competing literary versions that draw, in varying degrees, from oral sources.

The adventures of Jack were first recorded by Benjamin Tabart in 1807 as The History of Jack and the Bean-Stalk. *Tabart no doubt relied on oral versions in circulation at the time, though he claimed to base his tale on an "original manuscript." What is particularly striking about Tabart's Jack is his*

1. [illegible]

From Joseph Jacobs, "Jack and the Beanstalk," *English Fairy Tales* (London: David Nutt, 1890).

evolution from an "indolent, careless, and extravagant" boy into a son who is both "dutiful and obedient." Instead of marrying a princess and ascending to a throne, Jack lives with his mother "a great many years, and continued to be always happy."

Tabart's Jack becomes an exemplary character, a role model for children listening to his story. He is not at all a master thief who makes off with the giant's possessions but a dispossessed boy who is recovering what by rights belonged to him. From a fairy, Jack learns that his father was swindled and murdered by the giant up in the beanstalk and that he was destined to avenge his father's death. A powerful moral overlay turns what was once probably a tale of high adventure and shrewd maneuvering into a morally edifying story.

When Joseph Jacobs began compiling stories for his anthology English Fairy Tales, *he dismissed Tabart's "History of Jack and the Bean-Stalk" as "very poor" and reconstructed the version he recalled from childhood. Drawing on the memory of a tale told by his childhood nursemaid in Australia around 1860, Jacobs produced a story that is relatively free of the moralizing impulse that permeates Tabart's story. The British folklorist Katherine Briggs has referred to Jacobs's version as the "original," but it is in fact simply one of many efforts to recapture the spirit of the oral versions in widespread circulation during the nineteenth century.*

In the southern Appalachian mountains, Jack has become a popular hero, a trickster figure who lives by his wits, with the difference that the American Jack steals guns, knives, and coverlets rather than gold, hens that lay golden eggs, and self-playing harps. A 1952 film adaptation of "Jack and the Beanstalk" stars Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, with Costello playing Jack, an adult "problem child."

HERE WAS ONCE upon a time a poor widow who had an only son named Jack, and a cow named Milky-white.[2] And all they had to live on was the milk the cow gave every morning, which they carried to the market and sold. But one morning Milky-white gave no milk, and they didn't know what to do.

MAXFIELD PARRISH,
"Ferry's Seeds," 1923

A fey Jack is about to plant the magic beans in this advertisement for Ferry's seeds.

"What shall we do, what shall we do?" said the widow, wringing her hands.

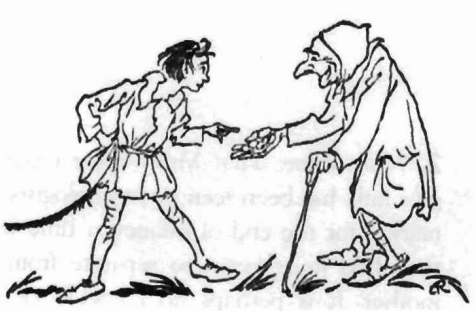
"Cheer up, mother, I'll go and get work somewhere," said Jack.

"We've tried that before, and nobody would take you,"[3] said his mother. "We must sell Milky-white and with the money start shop, or something."

"All right, mother," says Jack. "It's market day today,

2. *Milky-white.* That Milky-white ceases to give milk has been seen by psychologists as a marker for the end of infancy, a time when the child must begin to separate from the mother. It is perhaps no coincidence that Jack leaves home just when the cow goes dry.

3. *"We've tried that before, and nobody would take you."* Jack, like Aladdin before him, is the prototype of the undeserving hero who succeeds in living happily ever after. Aladdin is described as an "incorrigible good-for-nothing" who refuses to learn a trade and drives his father to an early death. In Tabart's version of the tale, Jack is "indolent, careless, and extravagant" and brings his mother to "beggary and ruin."



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Jack and the Beanstalk," 1933

A quaint fellow offers the naïve Jack a handful of beans for the cow tethered at the end of the rope he is holding.

ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Jack and the Beanstalk," 1918

Jack inspects the beans that he has been offered in exchange for his cow. He and the bargain hunter are seen in profile, while Milky-white, the cow, looks straight ahead at the observer.

and I'll soon sell Milky-white, and then we'll see what we can do."

So he took the cow's halter in his hand, and off he started. He hadn't gone far when he met a funny-looking old man, who said to him: "Good morning, Jack."

"Good morning to you," said Jack, and wondered how he knew his name.

"Well, Jack, and where are you off to?" said the man.

"I'm going to market to sell our cow here."

"Oh, you look the proper sort of chap to sell cows," said the man. "I wonder if you know how many beans make five."

"Two in each hand and one in your mouth," says Jack, as sharp as a needle.[4]

"Right you are," says the man, "and here they are, the very beans themselves," he went on, pulling out of his pocket a number of strange looking beans. "As you are so sharp," says he, "I don't mind doing a swap with you—your cow for these beans."

"Go along," says Jack, "wouldn't you like it?"

"Ah! You don't know what these beans are," said the man. "If you plant them overnight, by morning they grow right up to the sky."

4. *sharp as a needle.* Folktales are usually devoid of irony, but this judgment is clearly intended to emphasize Jack's gullibility and to set the stage for the foolish bargain he makes. Contrary to conventional wisdom, which identifies fairy-tale heroes as active, handsome, and cunning, Jack and his folkloric cousins are decidedly unworldly figures, innocent, silly, and guileless. Yet Jack (like most simpletons, numbskulls, and noodles) slips into the role of a cunning trickster. In fairy tales, character traits shift almost imperceptibly into their opposites as the plot unfolds.

"Really," said Jack. "You don't say so."

"Yes, that is so, and if it doesn't turn out to be true you can have your cow back.'

"Right," says Jack and hands him over Milky-white's halter and pockets the beans.

Back goes Jack home, and as he hadn't gone very far it wasn't dusk by the time he got to his door.

"Back already, Jack?" said his mother. "I see you haven't got Milky-white, so you've sold her. How much did you get for her?"

"You'll never guess, mother," says Jack.

"No, you don't say so. Good boy! Five pounds, ten, fifteen, no, it can't be twenty.'

"I told you you couldn't guess. What do you say to these beans? They're magical, plant them overnight and—."

"What!" says Jack's mother. "Have you been such a fool, such a dolt, such an idiot, as to give away my Milky-white, the best milker in the parish, and prime beef to boot, for a set of paltry beans? Take that! Take that! Take that! And as for your precious beans here, they go out of the window. And now off with you to bed. Not a sup shall you drink, and not a bit shall you swallow this very night."

So Jack went upstairs to his little room in the attic, and sad and sorry he was, to be sure, as much for mother's sake, as for the loss of his supper.

At last he dropped off to sleep.

When he woke up, the room looked so funny. The sun was shining into part of it, and yet all the rest was quite dark and shady. So Jack jumped up and dressed himself and went to the window. And what do you think he saw? Why, the beans his mother had thrown out of the window into the garden had sprung up into a big beanstalk, which went up and up and up till it reached the sky. So the man spoke truth after all.

The beanstalk grew up quite close past Jack's window, so all he had to do was to open it and give a jump on to the beanstalk, which ran up just like a big ladder.[5] So Jack climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed till at last

5. *like a big ladder.* Like Jacob's ladder in the Old Testament, the beanstalk connects earth with an upper realm through the ogre's doom in a pagan and perilous.

he reached the sky. And when he got there he found a long broad road going as straight as a dart. So he walked along and he walked along and he walked along till he came to a great big tall house, and on the doorstep there was a great big tall woman.

"Good morning, mum," says Jack, quite polite-like. "Could you be so kind as to give me some breakfast?" For he hadn't had anything to eat, you know, the night before and was as hungry as a hunter.

"It's breakfast you want, is it?" says the great big tall woman.[6] "It's breakfast you'll be if you don't move off from here. My man is an ogre[7] and there's nothing he likes better than boys broiled on toast. You'd better be moving on or he'll soon be coming."

"Oh! Please, mum, do give me something to eat, mum. I've had nothing to eat since yesterday morning, really and truly, mum," says Jack. "I may as well be broiled as die of hunger."

Well, the ogre's wife was not half so bad after all.[8] So she took Jack into the kitchen, and gave him a hunk of bread and cheese and a jug of milk. But Jack hadn't half finished these when thump! thump! thump! the whole house began to tremble with the noise of someone coming.

"Goodness gracious me! It's my old man," said the ogre's wife. "What on earth shall I do? Come along quick and jump in here." And she bundled Jack into the oven just as the ogre came in.

He was a big one, to be sure. At his belt he had three calves strung up by the heels, and he unhooked them and threw them down on the table and said: "Here, wife, broil me a couple of these for breakfast. Ah! What's this I smell?

> Fee-fi-fo-fum,[9]
> I smell the blood of an Englishman,
> Be he alive, or be he dead
> I'll have his bones to grind my bread."

"Nonsense, dear," said his wife. "You're dreaming. Or perhaps you smell the scraps of the little boy you liked so

6. *great big tall woman.* Jacobs objected to the fairy that Jack first meets on his way to the giant's castle: "The object [of the fairy's account] was to prevent the tale from becoming an encouragement to theft! I have had greater confidence in my young friends, and have deleted the fairy who did not exist in the tale as told to me." Some oral tales suggest that the giant stole his wealth from Jack's father, but most, like Jacobs's version, eliminate the fairy and show Jack's first encounter as a meeting with the ogre's wife.

7. *My man is an ogre.* Jack's biological father does not appear in the tale. Like fairy tales that split the mother into a good, dead biological mother and a vigorous, evil stepmother, "Jack and the Beanstalk" can be seen as dividing the father into a benevolent, dead father and a powerful, cannibalistic father.

8. *the ogre's wife was not half so bad after all.* A metrical rendering of the story published in 1807 under the title *The History of Mother Twaddle, and the Marvelous Atchievments* [*sic*] *of Her Son Jack* turns the giant's servant into Jack's ally, whom he marries after decapitating the giant. Most versions of the tale show the ogre's wife as a protective figure who tries to shield Jack from the cannibalistic assaults of her husband.

9. *Fee-fi-fo-fum.* The rhyme appears in variant forms, most notably when it is recited in *King Lear* as "Fie, foh, and fume, I smell the blood of a Brittish man." The verse was first uttered by the two-headed Welsh giant Thunderdel: "Fee, fau, fum, / I smell the blood of an *English* man, / Be he alive, or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

MAXFIELD PARRISH,
"Jack and the Giant," 1908

A defiant Jack stands in the palm of the ogre, whose smile betrays his contempt for this diminutive fellow. The oil painting appeared on the cover of *Collier's National Weekly Magazine* in 1910.

much for yesterday's dinner. Here, you go and have a wash and tidy up,[10] and by the time you come back, your breakfast will be ready for you."

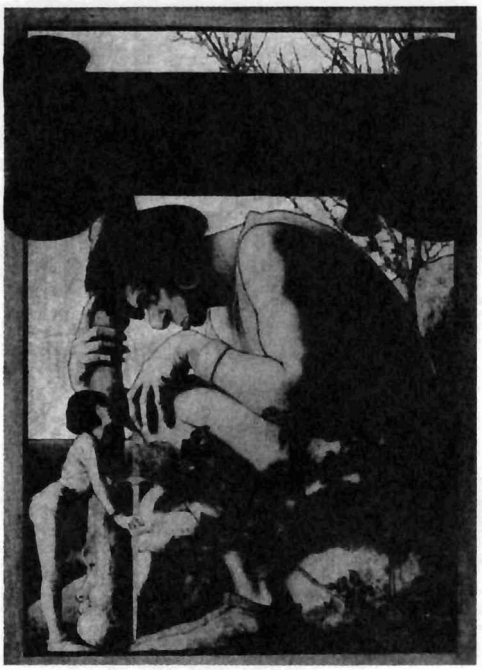
So off the ogre went, and Jack was just going to jump out of the oven and run away when the woman told him not to. "Wait till he's asleep," says she. "He always has a doze after breakfast."

Well, the ogre had his breakfast, and after that he goes to a big chest and takes out of it a couple of bags of gold,[11] and down he sits and counts till at last his head begins to nod and he began to snore till the whole house shook again.

Then Jack crept out on tiptoe from his oven, and as he was passing the ogre he took one of the bags of gold under his arm, and off he pelters till he came to the beanstalk, and then he threw down the bag of gold, which, of course, fell

10. *have a wash and tidy up.* The monsters of fairy tales and children's literature are often doubles of the protagonist, representing the uncivilized self with all its unrestrained impulses. The giant is somewhat like a big baby, who is treated by his wife like an unruly child.

11. *gold.* Jack usually takes gold, a hen that lays golden eggs, and a harp that plays itself, but some variants show him stealing a crown, jewelry, a gun, or a light. In a Blue Ridge Mountain version, Jack steals a rifle, a skinning knife, and a coverlet tricked out with golden bells. The last object usually sings, plays music, or calls out in some way to awaken the giant.



MAXFIELD PARRISH,
"Giant with Jack at His Feet," 1904

The giant's primitive club contrasts as powerfully with Jack's delicate sword as the giant himself with Jack. The cover illustration for *Poems of Childhood* reveals the beauty and strength of youth.

ANONYMOUS,
"Jack and the Beanstalk"

While the ogre is sleeping, Jack slips over to the table to grab one of the bags of money.

into his mother's garden, and then he climbed down and climbed down till at last he got home and told his mother and showed her the gold and said: "Well, mother, wasn't I right about the beans? They are really magical, you see."

So they lived on the bag of gold for some time, but at last they came to the end of it, and Jack made up his mind to try his luck once more[12] at the top of the beanstalk. So, one fine morning he rose up early, and got on to the beanstalk, and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed till at last he came out on to the road again and up to the great big tall house he had been to before. There, sure enough, was the great big tall woman a-standing on the doorstep.

"Good morning, mum," says Jack, as bold as brass. "Could you be so good as to give me something to eat?"

"Go away, my boy," said the big tall woman, "or else my man will eat you up for breakfast. But aren't you the youngster who came here once before? Do you know, that very day my man missed one of his bags of gold?"

12. *to try his luck once more.* Jack has been seen as a capitalist risk taker who has the kind of entrepreneurial energy required in the new economies developing in the British Empire. His expropriation of the "uncivilized" giant has been read as an allegory of colonialist enterprises.

"That's strange, mum," said Jack. "I dare say I could tell you something about that, but I'm so hungry I can't speak till I've had something to eat."

Well, the big tall woman was so curious that she took him in and gave him something to eat. But he had scarcely begun munching it as slowly as he could when thump! thump! they heard the giant's footstep, and his wife hid Jack away in the oven.

All happened as it did before. In came the ogre as he did before, said:

> "Fee-fi-fo-fum,
> I smell the blood of an Englishman,
> Be he alive, or be he dead
> I'll have his bones to grind my bread,"

and had his breakfast of three broiled oxen. Then he said: "Wife, bring me the hen that lays the golden eggs." So she brought it, and the ogre said: "Lay," and it laid an egg all

ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Jack and the Beanstalk," 1933

The ogre's wife warns Jack to keep still, but he cannot resist poking his head out from the oven to watch while the ogre looks with satisfaction at the golden egg laid by his hen.

ANONYMOUS,
"Jack and the Beanstalk"

Jack peers out from his hiding place to watch as the ogre looks at the hen that lays golden eggs.

WARWICK GOBLE,
"Jack and the Beanstalk," 1923

Jack makes a graceful descent down the beanstalk with the hen that lays golden eggs. Bean pods and blossoms create a dramatic decorative effect.

of gold. And then the ogre began to nod his head, and to snore till the house shook.

Then Jack crept out of the oven on tiptoe and caught hold of the golden hen, and was off before you could say "Jack Robinson." But this time the hen gave a cackle which woke the ogre, and just as Jack got out of the house, he heard him calling: "Wife, wife, what have you done with my golden hen?"

And the wife said: "Why, my dear?"

But that was all Jack heard, for he rushed off to the beanstalk and climbed down like a house on fire. And when he got home he showed his mother the wonderful hen, and said "Lay" to it; and it laid a golden egg every time he said "Lay."

Well, Jack was not content, and it wasn't very long

before he determined to have another try at his luck up there at the top of the beanstalk. So one fine morning, he rose up early, and got on to the beanstalk, and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed and he climbed till he got to the top. But this time he knew better than to go straight to the ogre's house. And when he got near it, he waited behind a bush till he saw the ogre's wife come out with a pail to get some water, and then he crept into the house and got into the copper.[13] He hadn't been there long when he heard thump! thump! thump! as before, and in came the ogre and his wife.

"Fee-fi-fo-fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman,
Be he alive, or be he dead
I'll have his bones to grind my bread,"

cried out the ogre. "I smell him, wife, I smell him."

"Do you, my dearie?" says the ogre's wife. "Then, if it's that little rogue that stole your gold and the hen that laid

ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Jack and the Beanstalk," 1918

With three cows dangling from his belt already, this ogre, who towers over his wife, sniffs the air and senses that there is even more to eat in the kitchen. Rackham's mastery in the art of drawing hands and feet becomes particularly evident in his rendition of the ogre.

13. *copper.* A copper is a large kettle used for cooling or to boil laundry.

the golden eggs he's sure to have got into the oven." And they both rushed to the oven. But Jack wasn't there, luckily, and the ogre's wife said: "There you are again with your fee-fi-fo-fum. Why, of course, it's the boy you caught last night that I've just broiled for your breakfast. How forgetful I am, and how careless you are not to know the difference between live and dead after all these years."

So the ogre sat down to the breakfast and ate it, but every now and then he would mutter: "Well, I could have sworn—" and he'd get up and search the larder and the cupboards and everything, only, luckily, he didn't think of the copper.

After breakfast was over, the ogre called out: "Wife, wife, bring me my golden harp." So she brought it and put it on the table before him. Then he said: "Sing!" and the golden harp sang most beautifully. And it went on singing till the ogre fell asleep, and commenced to snore like thunder.

Then Jack lifted up the copper lid very quietly and got down like a mouse and crept on hands and knees till he came to the table, when up he crawled, caught hold of the golden harp and dashed with it towards the door. But the harp called out quite loud: "Master! Master!" and the ogre woke up just in time to see Jack running off with his harp.

Jack ran as fast as he could, and the ogre came rushing after, and would soon have caught him only Jack had a start and dodged him a bit and knew where he was going. When he got to the beanstalk the ogre was not more than twenty yards away when suddenly he saw Jack disappear, and when he came to the end of the road he saw Jack underneath climbing down for dear life. Well, the ogre didn't like trusting himself to such a ladder, and he stood and waited, so Jack got another start. But just then the harp cried out: "Master! Master!" and the ogre swung himself down on to the beanstalk, which shook with his weight. Down climbs Jack, and after him climbed the ogre. By this time Jack had climbed down and climbed

ANONYMOUS,
"Jack and the Beanstalk"

Axe still in hand, Jack shows his mother what happened to the ogre once the beanstalk was chopped down. The good fairy hovering over Jack appears in some versions of the tale to inform Jack that the ogre appropriated his father's wealth and that he is fully entitled to recover it, even by theft.

ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Jack and the Beanstalk," 1913

The axe used by Jack to chop down the beanstalk goes flying through the air as the ogre tumbles down from his kingdom, feet first. Note that the decorative frame reprises the beanstalk motif and adds a touch of whimsy with the talking heads.

down and climbed down till he was very nearly home. So he called out: "Mother! Mother! bring me an axe, bring me an axe." And his mother came rushing out with the axe in her hand, but when she came to the beanstalk she stood stock still with fright, for there she saw the ogre with his legs just through the clouds.

But Jack jumped down and got hold of the axe and gave a chop at the beanstalk which cut it half in two. The ogre felt the beanstalk shake and quiver, so he stopped to see what was the matter. Then Jack gave another chop with the axe, and the beanstalk was cut in two and began

to topple over. Then the ogre fell down and broke his crown, and the beanstalk came toppling after.

Then Jack showed his mother the golden harp, and what with showing that and selling the golden eggs, Jack and his mother became very rich, and he married a great princess,[14] and they lived happily ever after.

14. *married a great princess.* Jack often lives happily ever after with his mother, as in Tabart's version, but Jacobs felt obliged to end with fairy-tale nuptials.