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Opening extract from

The Famous Adventures of Jack

Written by

Berlie Doherty

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The Famous Adventures of Jack

Berlie Doherty
illustrated by Steven Wood



To the memory of
Katharine M. Briggs

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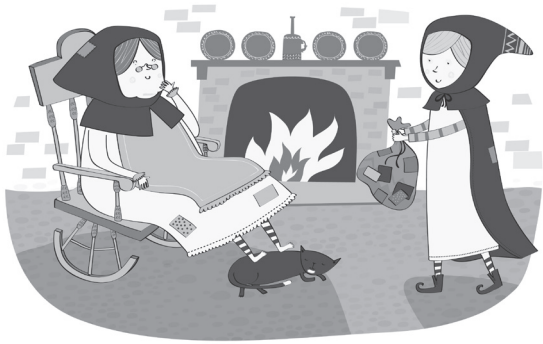
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A Tale Begins . . .



One day a girl was walking through the forest and she came upon an old woman sweeping leaves outside the door of a cottage.

'Excuse me,' the girl said.

The old woman stopped and the leaves scuttled like mice back to their heap outside her door.

'Is this where Jack lives?' the girl said.

'They're all called Jack around here,' the old woman said. 'Cousin Jack, Great Grandfather Jack, Uncle Jack, son Jack, and some is daft and some is dead and some is disappeared.

And some is lazy and good-for-nothing and waste-of-a-wishbone like my very own son. But they're all called Jack.' She gave the leaves a last little stir with her broom. 'You'd better come in.'

Inside the cottage was dark and very hot. Curled up in front of the flickering fire there was a black cat with a little white patch like a moon under his chin and another like a star on the tip of his tail. He yawned and stared at the girl, stretched himself full length and then curled lazily back into a ball. The old woman flumped into a chair and slipped off her shoes. She put her feet on the cat and nodded at the girl.

'Which Jack did you want?' she asked. 'They're ten a penny, Jacks are.'

'I don't know,' the girl said. 'I met a man on the road who said it was high time I met Jack. He asked me to bring this to you because it would help me to find him.' She held up a bag made of bits of this and bits of that – royal

velvet and old sacking, satin and rags, knitted squares and patches of flowered cotton.

'Did he now,' the old woman replied. 'And what was he like? Long raggedy tangle of a beard, and a cloak that's got daylight coming through, I suppose. Eyes like a squirrel's hoard of nuts. Talks a load of nonsense. I know him all right.'

'But as soon as he gave it to me, he disappeared.'

'Let's see what he's sent me then, let's see,' the old woman twitched her fingers impatiently and the girl opened the bag and put her hand inside. She drew out a pouch made of old leather, fastened with a piece of frayed string, and the old woman leaned forward and snatched it from her. She pulled open the string and shook out the contents of the pouch onto her palm.

'Beans!' she said in disgust. 'Well, we know what to do with them!' And quick-as-a-girl she stood up, opened the latticed window

behind her and tipped the beans into the garden. The cat shuddered and licked his toes. 'Anything else?'

The girl put her hand into the bag again and brought out a comb. 'I like this,' she said, putting it into her hair, where it shone as if it was studded with diamonds.

'What's that?' the old woman shrieked. 'That's not a comb! Give it here!'

The girl pulled the comb out of her hair quickly and saw that the old woman was right; it wasn't a comb at all, but the skeleton of a fish. She threw it onto the old woman's lap and for a moment it turned into a herring, gleaming and twisting, flashing with beautiful iridescent colours.

The cat opened his green eyes and snapped his teeth together, but in an instant the fish turned back into a spine of bones, and the old woman trilled her fingernails along it and made it chime.

'The king of the herrings!' she laughed.

'That's what this is! Would you like to hear about my great-grandfather Jack, and the king of the herrings?'

'Yes, please,' said the girl, who loved stories better than anything.

'Hmmph.' The old woman cleared her throat and leaned back against her cushions. 'Let's think then . . .'

The King of the Herrings



"Great-grandfather Jack's parents were very old and very poor when he was born. Not long after, his father died leaving the boy in the care of an old, sick mother.

'I've done my best for you, son,' she said, when she too came to the end of her life. 'You'll have to look after yourself now.'

'I've had everything I could have wanted,' Jack told her. 'But I wish I'd known my father for longer.'

Well, his mother died, and not long afterwards, Jack was out working the square of bumpy land outside the cottage, and an old

grey-haired man came walking by. The old man paused, leaning on the rickety wall and looking at Jack, watching every move he made and nodding quietly and sadly to himself, till Jack asked him if there was anything he might like – a draught of water from the well maybe, or a bite of bread and cheese.

'I was wondering,' said the old man, 'if you might like to ride with me and seek your fortune.'

Jack laughed and said, 'I'll come with you gladly, but how can I ride when you don't have a horse?' and he put down his spade and came out of the gate. What should happen but the old man snorted into the air three times and turned into an old shaggy grey horse. Jack scrambled onto its back and off they went.

They had been riding along for a week and a day when they came to the sea, and there on the sand Jack found a herring, gasping for its life. Jack picked the fish up and tossed it

back into the sea, and as it caught the light of the sun it flashed like diamonds.

'That was the king of the herrings,' said the horse. 'You did well to give it back to the sea, Jack.'

'I wouldn't have kept him. I wanted him to live. But I'll have this feather,' and Jack jumped off the horse's back again and picked up a silver-grey feather that was fluttering on the shoreline.

'Don't touch that,' the horse said. 'It won't do you any good.'

'I like it,' said Jack, and he climbed back onto the horse, put the feather in his pocket and forgot about it.

Not long after that they heard a terrible moaning and groaning and they climbed away from the beach to see what was happening. They found a giant, lying in a ditch with his hands clutching his head.

'I'm sick,' groaned the giant. 'I'm dying. Help me, help me.'

'Poor giant,' said Jack. 'I'm usually scared of giants, but I'll see what I can do.'

He found a cloth to bind the giant's head, and gave him food to eat, and helped him to stand up and stagger to his cave. There he built up a fire and made his bed neat for him so he could lie down in it and get well again.

'Thank you,' rumbled the giant, and his voice echoed round the cave like thunder. 'I won't forget what you did to help a giant.'

'You did well,' said the horse when Jack came back to him. 'But I wish you hadn't picked up that feather.'

'I'd forgotten about that.' Jack brought the feather out of his pocket and looked at it. 'No. I like it,' he said, and put it back into his pocket.

Well they travelled on, but they were getting tired and hungry by now and they needed somewhere to rest. Through the trees they caught sight of a mansion, its windows glittering red in the sunset.