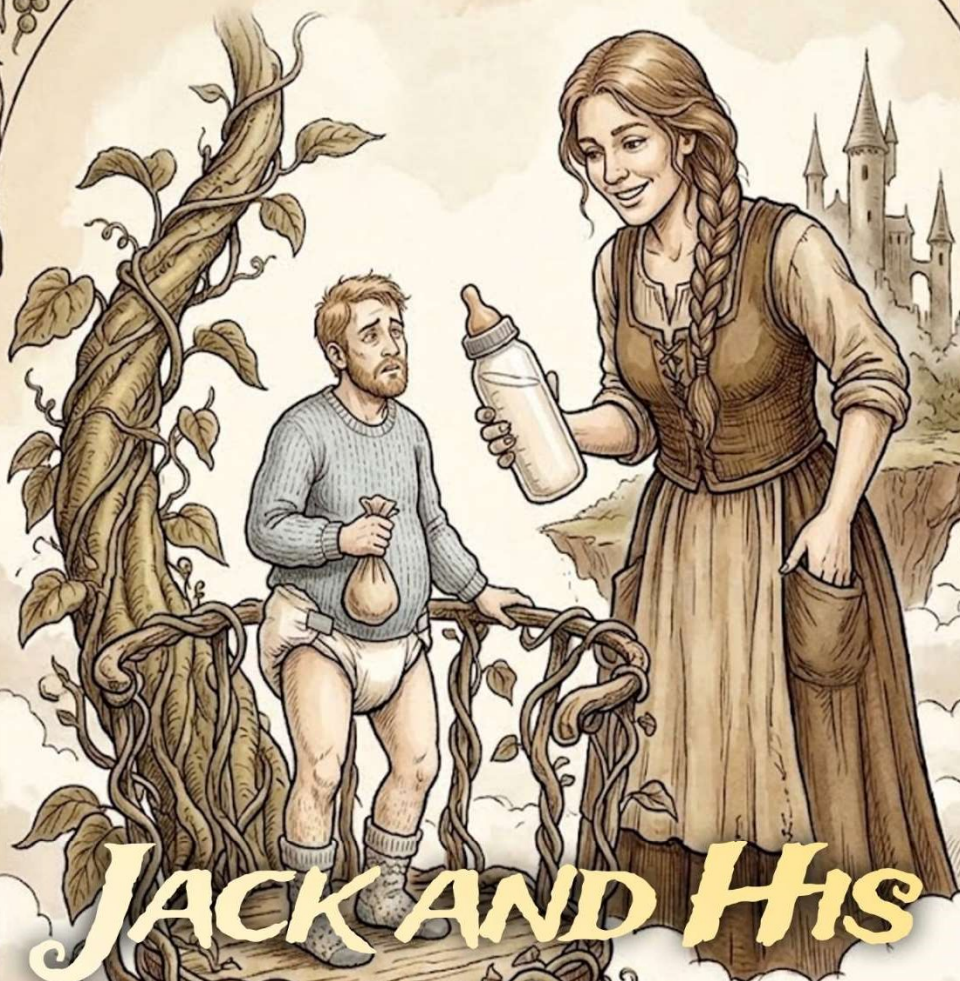


AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK



**JACK AND HIS
GIANT MOMMY
LITTLE LOTTIE**

Jack and His Giant Mommy

by
Little Lottie

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Jack and His Giant Mommy

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Chapter 1

A long time ago, in a kingdom far, far away, in a forgotten corner of the world, where the roads thinned into ruts and the fields into weeds stood a cottage so crooked it seemed to lean on the wind just to remain upright. Every dawn, smoke coughed from its shattered chimney, and every dusk, shouting seeped through the cracked shutters.

On this particularly cold fall morning, frost clung to the mossy roof like a silver pelt.

Inside, eighteen-year-old Jack ladled grey porridge from an iron pot that had long ago lost its shine. He was small for his age with sandy hair flopping over eyes too quick for their own good. Jack believed clever words could mend any hurt, yet his cheek still stung from yesterday's proof that wit seldom shields skin.

Hagatha barreled through the doorway, skirts swishing like angry crows. She wore bitterness the way knights wore armor.

"Slow as ever," she rasped, eyes narrowing on the steaming bowl. "If your father hadn't saddled me with you, I'd be feasting on sweets instead of slop!"

Jack bit the inside of his lip. He had never tasted sweets, only heard merchants praise them.

"Morning, Mother," he offered, setting the bowl before her. "I kept it from burning this time."

She dipped a wooden spoon, tasted, and spat into the hearth. "Flavor of muddy boots." The spoon whipped across the kitchen. Jack ducked, and it clattered off a beam.

He forced a grin. "Perhaps the boots were clean, then?"

The joke earned him a cuff to the ear. "Your tongue's as useless as your father's promises. Off with him to chase dragons, leaving me with a whelp and an empty cupboard!"

Jack steadied himself on the rough stone wall. He was six when Father strode out the gate with a sword too big for dreams.

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Mother's eyes had never softened after that. "I'm thinking of snaring trout from the brook," Jack said helpfully.

"Thinking?" She leaned close; her breath smelled of stale onions. "Thoughts don't butter bread. It's coins we need, you dullweed."

A draught hissed through a missing pane, lifting Hagatha's gray-streaked hair. She wrapped her shawl tighter but made no move to mend the window. Jack had patched holes with rags until no rags remained.

The rest of the day crawled beneath dark clouds. Hagatha ordered Jack to chop wood, though the axe was more wood than blade.

She grumbled, "Keeps getting colder and colder. I suppose you want me to freeze, don't you?"

All the while, as he chopped, she complained over his shoulder, saying he swung too slow, then called him reckless when a chip flew near her skirts.

After a while, Hagatha thrust a splintered broom into his hands. "Sweep the porch. One pebble left out of place, and you'll be sleeping without blankets tonight."

Jack walked to the porch. He swept, though the wind merely returned the straw and leaves to their former spots. Beyond the fence stretched hills and dales. Somewhere out there, adventurers sang by campfires, counting treasures. Jack's pulse quickened at the thought, but his mother's voice dragged it back.

"Daydreaming again?" She clamped a hand around his wrist, squeezing until his knuckles whitened. "It was your daydreaming that made him leave! And we got nothing but hunger."

"I was a child," Jack whispered.

"A worthless child." She released him with a shove.

The sun crept west, fingers numb around the broom handle. When the chores were finished, supper proved thinner than dawn's meal. Hagatha gnawed dry crusts while muttering calculations of

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debts owed to millers and bakers. Jack tried to share a plan of gathering herbs to sell, but she silenced him with a stare sharp enough to shave steel.

Night settled, cold enough to make the cottage beams groan. Hagatha claimed the single cot by the embers. Jack climbed the ladder to the attic—really a crawlspace beneath sagging shingles. Up there, the air felt like the inside of a snowdrift, and his breath plumed before him.

His bed consisted of two threadbare blankets and a burlap sack for a pillow. When he lay down, the floor creaked as if objecting to the burden. Through a fist-sized hole in the roof, a slice of sky glittered. One star, bright and stubborn, winked at him.

Jack clasped his calloused hands. “Star,” he murmured, voice trembling more from longing than cold, “send me something... gold, luck, adventure... anything to change this life.”

The star answered with silence, but Jack fancied it pulsed a little stronger. Perhaps, somewhere beyond the darkness, his plea had been heard.

Below, Hagatha’s snores rumbled like distant thunder. Jack turned toward the hole, letting the starlight stripe his face. His eyelids drooped, but his hopes climbed higher than any tower he’d ever seen.

And above the hushed clouds, unseen, a wind began to stir as though the sky itself were listening.

Chapter 2

Morning crept into the ramshackle cottage like a thief, filching what little warmth the hearth had left. Jack rose before the rooster bothered to crow, hoping to tidy the kitchen and spare his mother a fresh reason to snap. He brushed crumbs from the scarred table, set out two chipped bowls, and even reheated yesterday's porridge. With a splintered spoon, he stirred it and added a hopeful pinch of wild mint he'd hidden in his sleeve.

Hagatha stumped in, eyes red as embers. "Perfume in our gruel, is it? Think a weed can hide the taste of poverty, or are you just looking to poison me?"

"It might sweeten the morning," Jack answered, forcing cheer. He slid her bowl across the warped table as though presenting a king's feast.

She sniffed, scowled, and hurled the bowl against the hearthstone. The porridge sizzled where it landed. She rounded on him, fists planted on her hips. "Useless, boy. If you can't cook, you might as well get out there and earn us some money, you lazy loaf!"

"I'll head out today, then, mother, and do what I can."

She jabbed a crooked finger toward the door. "Then go get your carcass out of here, crawl in gutters, clean outhouses, rob the dead for all I care. Just come back with money, or don't come back at all!"

Jack's stomach clenched, but he nodded. "Yes, Mother." He wrapped a fraying scarf around his neck, opened the door, and let the icy wind slap his face before she could do worse.

Two miles of rutted lane led to Barleycross Farm, whose chimneys puffed welcoming smoke above brown fields. Wheaton Barleycross, a stout man with side-whiskers, leaned on a fork when Jack hailed him.

"Mornin', lad. Trouble at home again?"

"Only the ordinary kind, sir. Have you work to spare?"

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Wheaton's wife, Maribel, appeared with a baby bundled to her chest. Pity twinkled in her eyes. "We could use another set of hands clearing the north field."

Jack bowed, and the day began. He hoisted gourds as large as a person, pried gnarled roots from frozen soil, and raked last season's straw into heaps that smelled of wet ash. His back shrieked, but with every ache, he imagined Hagatha bragging to neighbors about her industrious son. That warmed him better than the weak fall sun.

At noon, Maribel beckoned him to the stoop, pressed a mug of broth into his numb fingers, and slipped him an extra heel of bread when no one looked. Jack's thanks came out as steam.

By twilight, the field lay tidy beneath a violet sky. Wheaton jingled two copper pieces into Jack's palm. The coins were dull, yet to Jack they gleamed like dragon scales.

"I wish it could be more. You did a fine job today." Wheaton said.

"But we have our own financial worries, my lad."

"It's more than I had this morning." Jack closed his fingers around the treasure as though it might sprout wings.

Wheaton placed his hand on Jack's shoulder. "You're a good boy, Jack. If I have any more work for you, I'll let you know."

He started home beneath the first evening star. Each step clacked the coins together, a music he rehearsed in his head. Mother smiling, Mother proud, Mother perhaps soft for once.

Smoke ribboned from the cottage when he arrived. Hagatha sat before the hearth, sharpening a knife whose edge already glimmered cruelly. "You're late."

"I brought these." He laid the coins on the table like sacred offerings.

Her eyes narrowed. "Two?"

"It was all the work was worth, Mother. Tomorrow I..."

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She snatched them. “A whole day gone and this is it? You squander time like your father squandered vows.” She tucked the coins into her bodice. “Worthless, lazy, good-for-nothing boy.”

Jack opened his mouth, closed it, and forced a small smile. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“The cow.” She jerked her thumb toward the lean-to shelter they used as a barn. “Go milk her. At least she produces something of value to this family.”

Outside, the air smelled of damp straw and regret. The heifer, a sway-backed creature Jack had once named Buttercup in brighter days, grunted softly. He stroked her coarse neck. “Easy, old girl. We’ll manage.”

The bucket filled slowly, each thin stream echoing in the wooden pail like rain in a well. Jack hummed to keep his spirits aloft, the tune half lullaby, half soldier’s march.

Inside, Hagatha waited with folded arms. Jack offered the bucket. She dipped a finger, tasted, and spat.

“Sour!”

“I drew it fresh, I swear—Buttercups just old—”

“Excuses!” The pail became a weapon.”

She flung the milk into his face. Cold splattered down his shirt, dripped from his lashes. Then the empty bucket followed, striking his face with a hollow thunk.

“You curdle everything you touch,” she hissed. “Tomorrow, you take that bag of bones to the butcher. Bring back not a copper short of two silver crowns, or you’ll wish you’d been slaughtered with her.”

Two crowns! Even a plump cow fetched barely one. Jack swallowed.

Jack wiped milk from his eyes. “Yes, Mother. I’ll do my best.”

She scoffed. “Do better, do decent for once! Now, clean up this mess!”

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She stormed to her cot, kicked off her shoes, and turned her back on him. The cottage settled into crackling silence, broken only by her wheezy breaths.

Jack blinked, milk trickling into his eyes, yet he did not raise his hands. Instead, he fetched a rag, knelt, and mopped the puddle before it soaked deeper into the splintered floor.

Jack climbed the ladder to the attic. His clothes stiffened as they dried, smelling faintly of barns. He lay on his pallet, gazing through the same star-shaped gap in the roof.

“Star,” he whispered, voice raw, “I tried. I really tried. If there’s any magic left in the world, send it my way. Send anything.”

A gust rattled the shingles, and the star’s light quivered like a promise about to break or maybe about to begin.

Jack closed his eyes, the taste of sour milk still on his lips, and dreamed of mornings not yet made.

Chapter 3

Jack rose while dawn was still a rumor on the rim of the world. He got himself cleaned up for his trip to town.

Dawn burned pink on the fields when Jack unlatched the cottage gate. Buttercup's rope was looped over his shoulder, and Hagatha's voice chased him down the lane like an arrow. "Two silver crowns, or don't bother coming back!" They were not words of farewell. They were a threat.

Jack nodded once, swallowed what felt like a stone in his throat, and set off down the rutted road toward Town.

The words echoed in every puddle he stepped past. Buttercup plodded beside him, ribs showing beneath her rough hide. Jack gave her neck a rueful scratch. "I know, old girl. Neither of us asked for this."

The road to town wound through wind-bent willows and patches of bracken already rusting with autumn. Midway, the lane crossed marshy lowlands where mist clung to reeds like unspun wool. There, a creak and a curse reached Jack's ears. Around the bend, a wagon sat crooked in a mire of gray mud.

Its wheels spun uselessly while an elderly man with a white beard dressed in fine robes of blue embroidered with silver comets leaned his full weight on the spokes, but the wheel would not budge.

Jack hurried closer. Glass bottles clinked inside the hooded cart, catching shards of morning light. A painted sign on the side read: ALDWYN THE MAGNIFICENT.

"Need a hand, sir?" Jack called.

The man pushed back his pointed hat, revealing a shock of white hair and eyes bright as gold coins.

The man straightened, puffing. "I need a strong ox, a gust of north wind, or perhaps a miracle. But I suppose a hand will do."

Jack tied Buttercup to a nearby stump and planted his boots at the buried wheel. At the old man's count, they heaved. Mud sucked