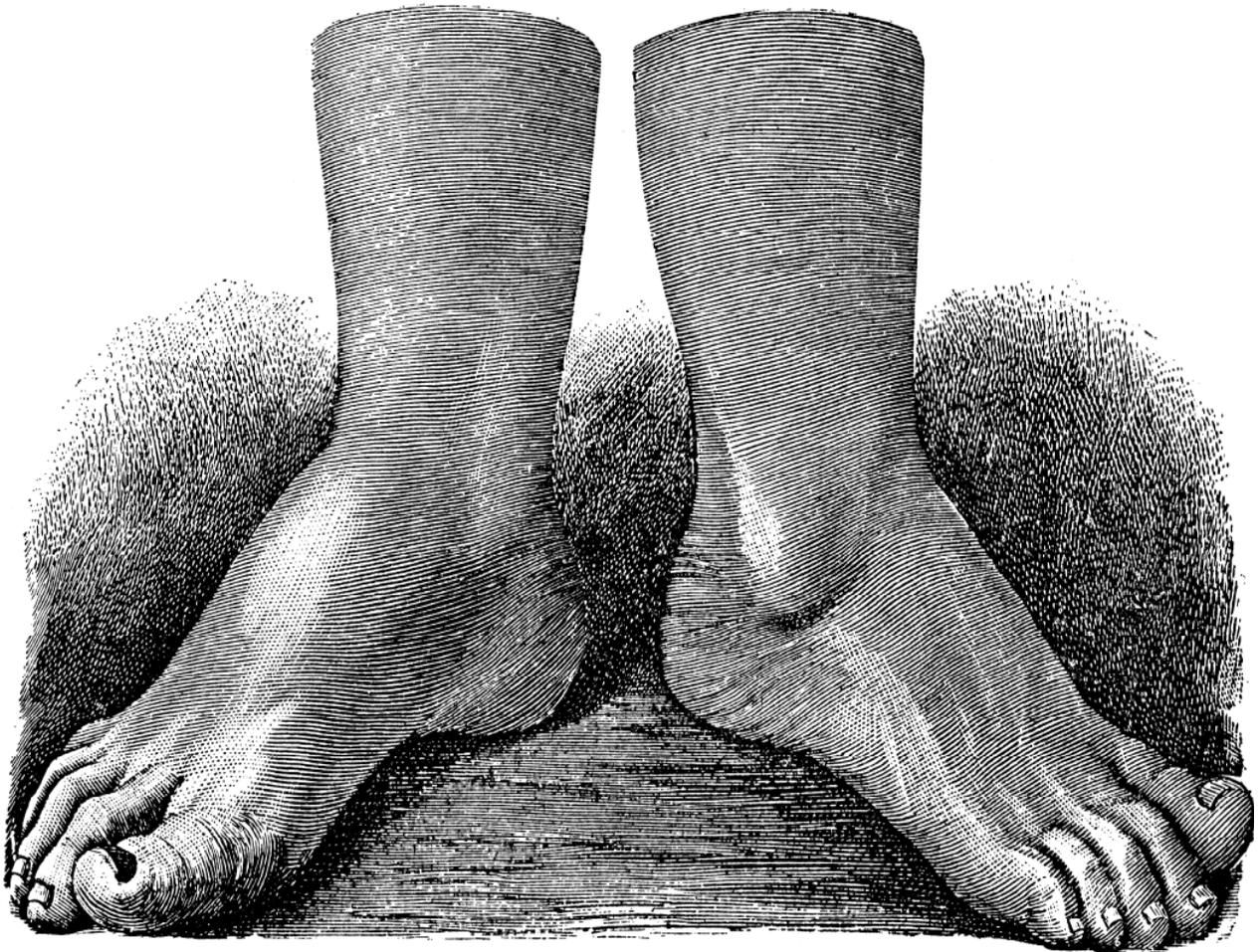


The Biography of a Bouncing Boy Terror
By
Ysabeau S. Wilce



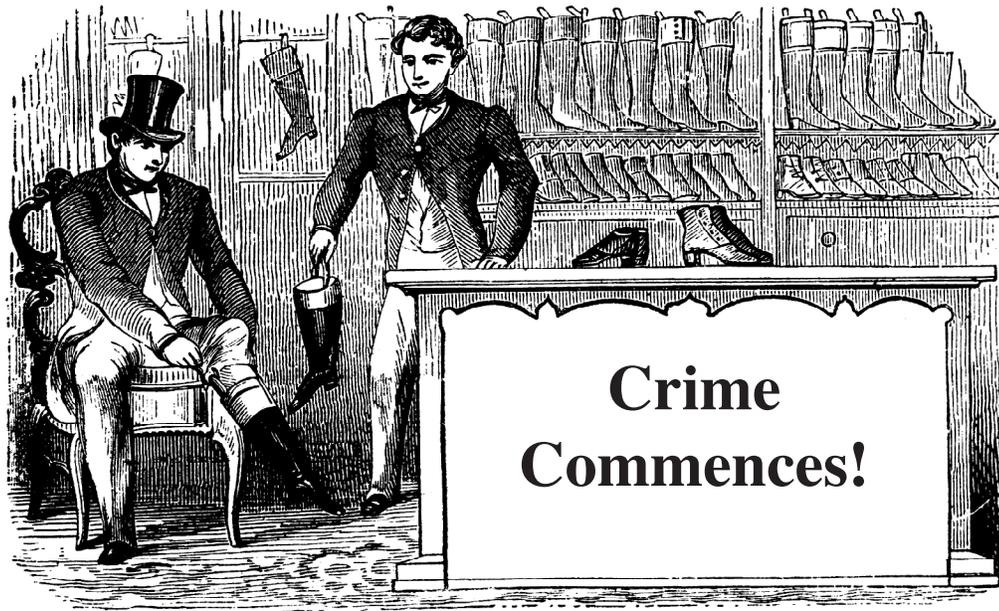
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Once upon a time, my little waffles, far across the pale eastern sands, a baby boy bounced from his mother's womb into a dark and dangerous world, into a land well full of hardship, turmoil, and empty handball courts. This boy, starting tiny and growing huge, would one day become a legend in the minds of his minions, a hero in the hearts of his hobbledehoy, the fanciest lad of them all: Springheel Jack!

And this, my dovetails, is the story of how the bouncing began.

Now in the beginning young Jack was not a rowdy tyke, well full of the jiggamaree and the falder-a-oo. The other childer might drive their mammas mad with fancy ideas of fun, but young Jack was not made for sportive tricks. He was his mamma's muffin and he kept to her side, helping in the smelly sport of making matches, which phosphoric occupation was how the family kept fed. They were a poor household, with no extra divas for white sugar or white bread, and all ten of Jack's tiny brothers and sisters must put paws into keeping the darkness of poverty at bay. Dipping lucifers at ten glo-

ries a decade leaves little room for boisterous fun.

Well dingy was the rundown tenement in which Jack's family lived, perched atop a noisome blind tiger from which issued rousting and revelry all hours of the night—illegal whist games, bitter beer, and up-against-the-wall fiddling. Well dingy was the rundown room into which Jack's family squeezed, tiny oil lamp the only tiny light, tiny window opening into tiny alley, and tiny pinch-faced siblings with cold blue fingers dipping match sticks into glowing blue poison. Instead of a cat, the family kept Hunger, which crouched in the corner of the tiny room, wiggling its tail and licking its prickly chops, waiting, just waiting. They had each other but they had nothing else, not even shoes to cover their frigid toes. Their days were poisonous and dreary.

But at night, dear doorknobs, when the dipping was done and the little pots of phosphorus illumined the shadows, Jack lay in his nest of rags, tucked up against his baby mice siblings and he dreamed away the pallid gray world: the knobby fingers, the tightening tummies, each drab day dribbling into another drab day, endlessly endless. At night Jack dreamed of colors: glimmering, glittering, glistening, glowing colors—cyan, jade, celadon, amber, cobalt, wheat, orange, plum, lavender, and magenta. But the color that shone the most through Jacko's dreams was the brilliant tang of red: cerise, sangyn, vermilion, carmine, crimson, gules, rust, rose, cochineal. Rushing friendly warm red, delicious and hot.

Well, my nifty needles, once a week Jack's mamma would take the little boxes of matches and place them into her market basket for to redeem. The other childer stayed home, under the concern of Jack, but the baby who coughed went with mamma, wrapped in newspaper

and tucked also into the basket, sleeping uneasily among the boxes of spark. At the factory of Zebulon Quarrel & Dau., Manufacturers of Lucifers, Phosphates, & Triggers, Jack's mamma would turn in the week's hundred boxes and receive into her thin hand one dull gold diva and eleven dingy glories, and on this happy day, there would be moldy cheese and squashed kale pie for supper.

But one day, Jack's mamma could carry neither basket nor baby. The sickly prickles were itching through the City, and like all Disease, they enjoyed the poorest people first, leaving the rich for a luscious fat dessert. In Jack's mamma's illness, it fell to her muffin to do her duty, else gobbling Hunger would creep from its corner and snatch the childer up, one by one. So, leaving the basket for the baby who coughed, Jack packed the boxes of matches in a crumpled cracker box and set out down the splashy wet streets to Zebulon Quarrel's crenellated factory.

Through the sloppy streets he sloshed, brave Jackling, clutching his cracker box from the splashing dillys, the clippy horsecars, and the pushing people who were eager to get home to their toasted cheese dinners and hot tea before darkfall. At the hulking behemoth gates of Quarrel's factory, wee Jack stood upon the iron shoe scraper and handed his cracker box upward to the grimacing factotum behind the window rail. Handed down he was, after a few minutes of stolid counting, the munificent sum of one dull faced diva and eleven chipped glories. A fortune in coin.

Thus paid, Jacko slogged to the 99 Glory Tuckshop where to buy squashed pie and moldy cheese, and perhaps even a crock of spinach paste for the hungry childer's evening sup. Full darkness lingered in the wings of the sky, waiting for its cue, and the graying rain drove down like

needles, stitching the evening in silvery sorrow. The streets were most empty and wet now, and only sweet Jacko, with his blue bare feet and his ragged sweater, hopped through the puddles, shivering.

Then—Jack paused.

Then—Jack poised.

Then—Jack stood staring into a glowing window front by which he had just been hurrying, and there he saw a thing that caught in his head like happy, stuck in his sight like sugar, a vision that near tore his breath away. A vision that seemed sprung from his most secret special dreams.

A pair of red sparkly boots.

And what boots—heels as high as heaven and toes as sharp as salt. Gleaming stove pipe uppers greaving tall and slick, and on the tip of each pointy toe a snake's head leered, spitting tongue and bone sharp teeth.

And what sparkle—glistening and glittering in the evening light like diamond rain after the shower has stopped, like snow in the sun, like a thousand stars clustered in the midnight sky.

And what red—slick wet red, sparking like sunshine, thick and rich as paint, gleaming like a pricked finger, like a stormy dawn, like first love.

Jacko opened the door and inside he went. The shop contained a vast smoky gloom from which sprang the vague hulk of cabinets and large pieces of carved wood whose shapes Jack could neither see fully nor understand. He cared not for the shadows or the smoke; he cared only for the brilliant boots in the window.

“Do you see love?” A squeaky voice inquired from the distant reaches of the room.

“Those red sparkly boots in the window—” stuttered Jack, overcome by fog and fright. A jackdaw flapped out

of the shadows, perched upon a hat rack, and regarded our boy with flat button eyes.

“A most discerning young dasher,” said the grammer who leapt from the back of the store with a flash of blue petticoats and took up stand beside him, gripping his arm with a grandmotherly pinch. In the gloam her teeth shone as green as grass, and her ancient monkey head was surmounted by a soufflé of a cap. “Best in the house. Chop-chop, my little darlings, and come to your bungalow baby boy.”

The boots jumped out of their window, driven by their own joie-de-vie and began to caper nimbly on the counter top, heels clacking a fandango, tongues flapping a jaunty tune. The jackdaw cawed accompaniment and even the old grammer snapped gnarled fingers as the heels clicked and spun, snapping upward, diddling downward, the snake heads gnashing their needley teeth and spitting. Jack’s blue toes began to tap the splintery floor and his heart jiggled and jumped in his chest. Never before had he seen such a glorious slick shade of red and now he was completely caught.

“The boots like your sweetness,” said the grammer, and both she and the jackdaw giggled. “For a small price they shall be your daisies and together such fun you shall have.”

Jack’s jiggly heart flopped. What funds did he have to purchase anything other than moldy cheese and squashed kale pie? What funds would he ever get, in his dull little room, dipping poison matches for plungers to light their cigars from? And the hungry childer and the sick mamma waiting at home for his return. His world would be forever dull, all else was a forlorn hope. Jack’s wiggly heart died and he began to turn away.

“Cheap at the price, but dear in the taking,” the grammar said. “And naught price that you can not pay, I warrant.”

“I have no flash,” Jacko said, his sad exit halted. But his fingers felt the twist of his sweater wherein he had carefully placed the coins, rubbing their rounded shapes through the thin cloth.

The jackdaw spoke up then, its voice a buzz of suggestion. “What then burns in your hand, Jackanapes?”

Jack looked down to the sudden heat in his grubby paw and there lay the coins, not so dull now. The diva gleamed like the sun, with eleven little tiny silver moons circling its golden glow.

“But—”

The boots clicked their crimson heels together and the snake heads said, in slithery tandem voices: Darling Burning Boy, with us you shall be the Fleet Footed Fancy Lad, the Red-Haired Child of Sunset. No obstacle you cannot leap, no hunger you can not fill, no thirst you can not quench. Come and let us jump for joy!

Looking at the red sparkly boots, the color of his dreams, what could Jack think of hungry tummies in the tenement home, waiting for their crusty sup? What could he think of a sick mamma and a skull-headed baby, coughing instead of cooing? What could he think other than the glorious tap-dancing of the slap happy boots, the rich radiant red which filled his heart with warmth, flooded his brain with fun, and made his toes tap? Oh, our Jack was a good boy and perhaps for a tiny momento he did consider the cold little faces, the grinning Hunger waiting patiently in the corner, his mamma’s red swollen hands, but then the boots drummed a furious rhythm and in that rhythm, all else Jack forgot.

When all your life you have been cold, little inkwells,
how can you then resist the fire?

The grammer took the diva and eleven glories and dropped them into the gaping maw of the jackdaw which flapped off into the dark shadows, still cackling. Then the knobby old lady flicked her hankie at Jacko, who jerked at the waft of hyacinth that washed over him. He coughed and as he coughed she flicked again, speaking a strange word that crackled and snapped in the air, sparking, arcing.

Jack shut his peeps to the brilliant flicker and when he opened them full wide again, the grammer was gone, the darkness was gone, the shop was gone, and he stood, light-footed, in the center of the street. Rosy daylight suffused the air, pooling pinkly on the surface of the puddles and the wet walls of the surrounding buildings. He looked down, and the snakes hissed happily, little tongues tasting the clean morning air. Then his boots took to the sky like big red balloons, carrying him upward on their flight. The boots capered, they danced, they trotted, they garvotted, and they leapt full fifty feet in the air, tongues clacking with joy, Jack shouting with joy, as they flew.

Over the bright morning roofs, they sprang, Jack and his Jackboots, traipsing across tree tops. They jumped over the milk cart, and the trash cart, and little lines of childer trailing off to school. They scattered traffic brass and barchouches, flyers and flowerbeds, leaping ever higher into the sterling blue sky. Never before had Jack felt so lovely, so wise, so tall and so very very clever and in his happiness he yodeled a little tune, full of hope and wonderment. The red sparkly boots were just the thing and now that he had them, he could not imagine his feet, his heart, his life, without them. The world was fresh and new, and Jack with it, all dewdrop eager-eyed, truly footloose and fancy free.

But after a time, Jack grew tired of the jumping and wanted to rest. He watched the cool green grass bounce by his springs, and yet when he tried to halt so to rest under the shade trees, the sparkly red boots kept bouncing him along. He grabbed at railings as he passed, sweaty hands sliding from the iron; he was flying so fast now that it seemed perhaps the Wide World itself was moving and he was the one standing still. Jacko shouted for help—to the brass directing traffic, to the washwoman kneeling on marble steps, to the costermonger polishing her apples, but his shouts wisped in the wind and were lost. Still he bounced on, going ever higher and higher with each leap, until his ears rang and his head spun, and he was fair ill with dizziness. He snatched at chimney pots and street lights, at lightning vanes and flag pole finials, but still he sprang onward.

Then suddenly he stopped.

Jackie stopped and he tumbled, down into the dust and lay there, thankful that the bouncing had ceased, although his head still seemed to leap and spin, spin and leap. His tum twisted and turned but was too empty to urp.

“Well, now, little leaper,” a voice said, “How far can you go before you kiss the sun and burn your roly poly red lips?”

Jack squinted up, but only a shadow could he see, bright sun burning behind a darkened head.

“I cry sorrow,” said Jacko, “And offer thanks. The boots fair well skint me.”

“So I see,” said the friendly voice. “Perhaps you’d like me to help you take them off?”

“Ayah so,” agreed Jack, whose tender tootsies, not yet used to encompassing leather, were now painfully raw. But no amount of pulling would remove the sparkly red

boots from Jack's wee feeties, and while you, clever tulips, are probably not surprised by this turn of the ankle yourselves, it came as a huge and utter gasp to our poor little Jackomydarling.

"You have bought a bargain," said the gramper, for tugging and pulling had revealed him to be so. "And keep it you shall. The boots are tired now and need to rest, but once they have had their kip, you'll be bouncing again."

"But bouncing be done!" cried Jack. Now that the fun was resting, he was suddenly recalling the hungry siblings, the sick mamma, the coughing baby, all waiting for him to return with their chow. But now he had no money and no chow, nothing but sparkly red boots which soared and galloped but which could not keep Hunger at bay. "I must slip the boots and return for my flash, for the coins I need to buy munch for my dear loves at home."

The gramper smiled, and shook his stick. A jackdaw flapped down and perched upon his shoulder, gazing at young Jacko with flat black eyes. "The shop is closed and the shopkeeper gone. What is bought can not be returned."

"But my lovely lollies? My sweet mamma and my tiny siblings? The baby who coughs? Can they live? Must they die for my sparklies?" Tears begin to stir in Jack's eyes and all his joy in red was gone.

"Perhaps this consideration should have come before the purchasing," the gramper said, "But such is the rashness of youth. You say you are fair well skint, of both flash and dash—maybe so."

From its perch upon the gramper's shoulder, the jackdaw spoke up then, its voice a burr of suggestion: "What then burns in your hand, Jackolantern?"

Jack looked down to the sudden coldness in his grubby

paw and there, caught in his fingers, gleamed a strand of pearls, tiny white moons strung on a golden cord. Never had he seen anything so round and pure, and yet how had it come to be in his hand? In his soaring, he must have snatched and noticed not.

“Did you not look before you leapt? Or while leaping look?” The stick was shook again, and pointed upward, towards an open window and a fluttering drape. “Doors are lock’d but who could imagine that larceny might leap on springy heels?”

The jackdaw opened his wings in a great flutter, launching upward with a hoarse cry and when Jack lowered his shielding arm, the gramper and his fetch were gone. But the pearls remained, cool and knobby, and so too did the open window. Jack looked from one to the other, considering, and a rough red magick began to burn in his brain. He stood and tapped one red sparkly heel upon the grass. The snake head spit, and with the tamp Jack felt vigor anew course upward through his tender tootsies, his knobby knees, his empty tum, his sad heart. When he stamped again, this time with both heels, upward he soared, like an arrow, to the beckoning window.

When Jack bounced home to his family’s tenement room, laden down was he with gifts bestowed upon him by his bouncing boots and many open windows. With high springy heels and unlocked doors, roofs and balconies, the whole city was his huckleberry.

The tiny siblings greeted his arrival with weak squeals of joy, for instead of squashy kale pie, Jacko brought spicy chicken galantine, savory and strong. Instead of moldy cheese, there was cherry cream custard for afters and never more that sticky gritty spinach paste. The sick mamma and the baby who coughed got a spoonful of Madam

Twanky's Super Celebrated Celery Salt Med-I-Cine, which fixed them both right up. After much munching, Jack chucked the horrible match pots out of the window and the entire family removed to the Palace Union Hotel, where they reveled in lush carpets, hot water, and toast on demand. Hunger, left behind in the empty tenement room, slunk sadly down the street, looking for a new corner to call home.

And thus, darling dishrags, did wee Jacko take to a life of snuggery and sin, poaching purses, fixing races, mashing lovers, cutting cards. Thus was Springheel Jack born, the Bounciest Boy Terror ever to be seen. The reign of the Boots had begun!



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A SONG TO BOUNCE BY

Sung to the tune of "Marching Along"

Bouncing along, we are bouncing along
In our sparkly boots we are bouncing along
Jack is our leader
He's valiant & strong
And he'll spring us to riches
As we go bouncing along

Springing aloft, we are springing aloft
High as the birds we are springing aloft
Jack is our leader
He's brave & tough
He'll jump us to riches
As we go springing aloft

Jumping up high, we are jumping up high
Watch us soar as we jump up so high
Jack is our leader
He'll make sure we have pie
He'll spring us to riches
As we go jumping up high

