

**FANCY BREAD** by Gregory Feeley

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The ogre lifts his rockslide face and sniffs, cavernous nostrils distending. With a howl of rage—Jack can whiff his breath from where he hides—he stamps the tree-wide floorboards and cries out in a bowel-solving roar:

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*Fee, fye, fo, fum!*

*I smell the Blod of an Englysshman!*

Be he quicke or be he dede,

*I'll grinde his Bones to make my Brede!*

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Behind the oven grate, Jack feels his shanks quiver as though struck free from his spine. Wolves came down once from the hills and snatched a village child, and crows pluck corpses on the gibbet; but never did Jack imagine that his end might be another's maw. It is a terror beyond reckoning: his sweet flesh guttled like dough.

The ogre's goodwife assures him that what he smells is simply the remains of the boy he ate yesterday. Jack squitters in terror but the ogre seems mollified, for he sits down to be served a tremendous meal. The broth he slurps reeks of a mutton unknown to Jack's nose, and his stomach clenks at his mouth's watering. The ogre calls for a loaf, and when he sops then cracks loudly, Jack knows what he is crunching.

The din allows Jack to shift his cramped feet, stirring wisps of ankle-high ash which conceals hard lumps that bump his toes like riverstones. At last he sinks aching to his hams, and in the humdrum of the ogre's guzzling—even terror sates with surfeit—he nudges one of the lumps and discovers it an unrelieved crust. Jack brushes away bits of ash with wonder: the ogre, strong enough to disjoin him like a hen, owns no leaven.

Barrels of ale sluice the ogre's gullet as Jack squats in a plague pit of bones and ash. He cradles a rock of grain, pitiful weapon, and wonders at its coarseness. A memory stirs from childhood, the voice of traveling player declaiming on market day:

—

*Tell me, where is fancy bread,*

*Or in the heart, or in the head?*

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Hungry with no market-day bun, Jack had yearned for fancy bread, sticky with sugar and finer than cake, something he had tasted one Whitsunday. Later he wondered whether the player's question meant that fancy bread might exist only in the head, never to be tasted in the stomach. Bread with dough smooth as milk, bread so soft the toothless could eat it without sopping first. Had such yearnings led him in time to the hedge of the ogre's castle?

Replete and belching, the ogre nods at table like a swaying oak, knocks his spoon to the floor, and soon is snoring deeply. Fearful beyond measure—the goodwife does not come to aid him—Jack slowly pushes open the grate and creeps from the oven's belly, leaving ashy footprints even an ogre could follow.

It seems greatly daring that in his flight Jack could pause to pick up the spoon, but even in his terror he realizes that no man can be eaten twice. It is as long as his arm and heavier than any Jack has held, so he clutches it the harder and sneaks past, breaking into a run at the door.

Later he would try to recall whether he had heard a roar as he burst into sunlight. He had not looked back, and ran half a mile before slowing. The spoon is crusted with porridge, and when Jack finishes gasping he sniffs, then tastes it. The oats are merely greasy, but the tip of his tongue thrills at the metal's touch. It is silver, and he later sells it for six shillings. A shard of crust lodged in his pocket he discards with a shudder.

He never again tried to rob an ogre's fastness, a lesson learned if not remembered. (Once he saw a widow lay her dough on a bed of coals then sprinkle it with hot ashes, and shivered with sourceless dread.) Curled under a pew that night, cold and still hungry, Jack worries the experience for what else he can take. The day is already falling from memory like a cinder from burnt fingers, but as Jack nestles into the rug of sleep a shard presses hard against him, sharp so he feels every word: Bread made with men's bones never rise.

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Starvelings bedded under hedges never rise, either, but rather turn coldly stiff, in glorious reversal of the Devil's fell offer to change stones into bread. Jack feels hardened to petrification, but his limbs yield, if complainingly, as he crawls forth, brushing crumbs of dirt from his coat, to blink at the morning's pale glare. Gazing across the fields in the breath-steaming chill, he recognizes barley and, farther on, what looks to be rye, but nothing that nods like wheat-stalks. Nor pasturage for miles now: it's crusts and tubers Jack has to look forward to, assuming he is not offered a

hail of rocks.

The rutted path is muddy, but Jack is glad enough to see no lace of frost upon the standing water. Frozen roads traverse better and stink less, but it's a thin coat Jack wears this early March day, a hungry season with the winter stores dwindling and naught but peason planted. The wheel ruts are not deep, so the land is not yet too soft for fellers' carts; but Jack can see that felling time is over early here. The woods, like a sexton's hair, have receded steadily over the years, and the open fields show few stands of any size.

The sparsely hedged fields also offer few means of concealment, and Jack walks bent and brisk when a rise threatens to bring him within sight of harrowers, who will soon be out. He knows enough not to fear pursuit—no rustic will leave his work to accost a sturdy wayfarer a field away—but word travels fast even in villages, and he does not want suspicion running before him.

But no one is abroad at this least pleasant hour, too early for laborers and too late for the rogues who walk the roads at night. Other travelers—the tag-and-rag army of vagabonds and abandoned women who fill the highways—will be out soon, and Jack does not care to be numbered among them. If he has not a horse and a fine plumed hat, he must distinguish himself otherwise.

The first cottage he sees is not promising; but the men are out by now, so disappointment is not likely to prove calamitous. Jack cannot suppress a quaver of fear at approaching a strange door, but is by the knowledge that most peasants (with dangerous exceptions) are stupid as dirt. Ignorant of the ways of cozenage, they substitute a brute suspicion of all strangers: which, being surmounted, could leave them defenseless as hatchlings.

Jack sees no chickens in the yard, but no dogs neither. He fingers his beard for crumbs, then spits three times on his right hand. The effort produces a loud rumble in his stomach. Emboldened by such perceptible evidence of want, he knocks upon the door—not confidently, as serves some circumstances, but weakly as he thinks will be heard.

He is bent to one side as the door is opened and a servant girl looks out. “Ah, mistress, a cup of water in Christ's name. I am set upon and robbed of my wares, and beaten half to death besides.”

He steps back at this point, rather than forward as the servant fears, and staggers with a soft groan. The servant gasps—he is listening even as he grimaces—and before she can speak he brings up his hand and feels tenderly the back of his head. The pig's blood (from yesterday's unsuccessful venture) has dried in his hair, but enough comes away to redden his wet fingers and gives a half-clotted appearance.

“Jesu!” the girl exclaims. “Does it hurt?”

“More now than last night, though it scarce seems possible.” Jack looks at her ruefully. “I hid my face in my hands, but they kicked my ribs till I feared they be stove in. And my wares—” Here he sighs as if at the cruellest stroke of all. “My lace and pins and buttons, which I have three times sold thy lady in the spring, are stolen me.”

“The goodwife is not in,” says the witless creature. At this Jack lowers himself to the ground, as though his legs were failing him, and cries out briefly as one ham touches the packed earth.

“My teeth are not broke,” he says, touching them, “but I am sore dry. Is there water here cleaner than the ditch’s where I lay?”

The bird rushes for a ladle, and Jack looks up to peer through the door. It is a meaner cottage than will yield much. Servants in London eat better than freeholders here, who have a servant only because the tide of workless women and men spill into any house open to them. Jack guesses that the goodwife has lain in yearly, and is worn enough to need a drudge with the surviving brats, one who can moreover bend her back at harvest and spend winter weaving hemp or flax. A wolf gauging the gauntness of the deer, Jack judges this freeholder not far from becoming a landless laborer himself.

As if in confirmation, he hears a babe’s squall. Any mother still alive to give suck will be nearby, and Jack decides to work fast. He is rising as though painfully when the girl returns, dipper in one hand, a crust in the other. “Will you report this to the Justice?” she asks him.

“Lord, no, girl!” he cries in feigned alarm. “The village justice likes not wanderers, and is like to demand I prove no rogue myself. And how could I do that, with my wares gone?”

The girl crinkles her face in confusion, and Jack knows he is home. He drinks avidly (good water is scarce on the highways, and this is at least unclouded) and quickly examines the bread, as a merchant might eye a bolt of cloth. It is brown as her muddied hem, and smells to be rude maslin indeed, containing scant wheat and even some barley with the rye. Jack’s stomach clamors loudly and he eats, tasting barley in the hard and ill-risen bread, which will rest heavy in the stomach without filling it.

He thanks the girl and returns the dipper (it is of no value anyway) before commencing his cast. “Good woman, where shall I go now?” he asks earnestly. “I have no goods, nor means to return to London Town—” the name never fails in its effect—“so must offer my hands and strong back to earn my bread. Tell me where an honest man should go to find work.”

The cony looks ready to cry. “There is no place, alas,” she says. “Come you from a parish where work awaits every man willing? What a wonder if so!”

Looking suitably stricken, Jack protests his readiness to work and offers to perform any chore, however onerous, this freehold wants done. He straightens his back with scarce a wince to demonstrate resolve, and senses he is on the verge of being asked within—it is all he needs—when the sound of voices in back snaps the girl’s head around as if on a string. Jack’s labours are undone in an instant, a card-castle struck by wind, for the mistress of the house comes around, swollen-bellied, suspicious, and blanched of charity, and Jack is dealt with briskly. She does not recall past dealings with the pedlar, has no work to give him, and directs the injured man to take his knocks to his own parish, whither the Justice will speed him if he thinks to dally. And so Jack is sent back along the road, with no solace but the crust and his memory of the girl’s hurt eyes, bereft as though bidding him to return and devour her.

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No beer, scant bread, and uncertain fortunes ahead. Jack does not know the name of the township he is near, and would not betray ignorance by asking. It is not however a fortunate one, for the next bread he eats (a day later) tastes of vetches, what market-town folk call “horse-bread” who never have to eat it themselves. Cottagers are running low on corn, which a cold winter burns like wood: it will be gaunt weeks before the spring barley is up. Jack keeps an eye out for a servant-girl from a richer household than the cottagers’, but doors remain closed to him.

A village where you are not known is like a cow that has not yet been milked. Jack moves carefully through the parish, alert both to danger and opportunity. One morning he steals a chicken, which he plucks, roasts, and eats entire before he hears the halloo. On another he helps a goodwife whose husband has broken his leg: he hauls sacks of grain by cart to the miller, but gets nothing for it but dinner, for the woman watches closely all the while.

He stands agape at the mill, which growls and creaks like a giant’s wagon, and returns the suspicious looks of the miller and his son, who know everyone living in the village. The goodwife’s grain—it is barley, with not a peck of wheat—disappears into the grinding maw, and Jack feels a nameless dread that moves him to stand in the doorway. The goody attempts to oversee all stages of the operation, and quarrels fiercely over the division afterwards.

“He hath a magic thumb,” she complains to Jack as he pulls the cart—now, from the millstream, mostly uphill—back to her farm. And Jack thrills to think of the ways a miller might divert more than his rightful sixth part of the grain. He wishes to know more, but is fed and dismissed directly they return.

The spring brings rains, and too little sun otherwise. Apprehensions of a poor

harvest settle like an ache into the bones, and fear of the dearth grips all. Jack catches an ague and coughs for weeks, but the lengthening days save him. With the haymaking there is work for all, and Jack labours like any vagabond for his bread and ale. One tumble behind a hedge with a doxy whose man had been arrested, one sheaf of ballads taken from a vagrant who lay sleeping, and it is hard sweat for the rest of his gettings. Jack enjoys selling ballads, which are light for their value and allow him to deal with better customers than farm wives; but they are hard to procure save in London, where he cannot now go.

To avoid charges of vagrancy, he long claimed to be carrying a letter to a nobleman in another county, but a Justice of the Peace once read it, found its date long past, and destroyed it. Lately he has employed, with more success (though he hates using it), a letter attesting that he had been whipped as a vagrant and was being sent back to his parish. But now he swims safely in the great school of available laborers, their numbers swelled (he learns by always listening) not only by vagrants but also former husbandmen, forced off their land by falling prices and poor harvests. The engrossment of holdings is under way in the lands of corn, as it hitherto had been in the lands of sheep.

Jack hawks the ballads between the mill and the inn, speaking smoothly and pretending at times to sing from one. He catches the interest of a yeoman's wife, who fixes him with a saucy eye (or so he takes it) and asks him what the songs concern.

“Marry, here is a song of a new way to make bread,” he says smiling.

“A new way? And what might that be?”

“Why Madame, they employ *up and down husbandry*,” he replies with a leer.

The woman barks a laugh and pays tuppence for two. Boldly he asks how bread is made in her master's household, and she directs him to follow her servant. He gets a half-loaf of cheat bread—his first taste of wheat this year—handed him from the back door.

Standing in the chill air, with the hens keeping their distance and ducks jeering from the safety of their pond, the bread's soft texture and sweet taste awakens in him a rage never again to eat worse. No longer should Jack bend his back for brown bread, heavy with ill-ground pease and beans. If cozenage proves no perch, he shall not slip down but claw up.

Next morning he assaults a yeoman leaving the inn, gets three shillings but must hide in the woods for days, where rains fall incessantly and the boughs wave overhead as though bearing his swinging form. He crosses water, is attacked by dogs, travels roads by night and is set upon and beaten unconscious. Discovered by a constable searching for the robbers of a merchant party, he finds himself giving

evidence with them before a Justice. Imitating the merchants' accents and manner, he portrays himself as a journeyman bearing papers for his master, all now lost save for a scrap of ballad he had bought at a crossroad. He produces the scrap and is luckily not asked to read it.

Outside he is invited to accompany the travelers, who are going to Portsmouth. They are undeceived by his claim to be of their trade, but seem amused by his brass. Their party is bound for France, a land rich in opportunity, where gold flows only upward but one may catch some drops, like water from a fountain, as they flee the stony earth.

Jack accompanies them through counties he has never seen, past lands given over entirely to sheep, enormous manors glimpsed at a distance, and the occasional rubble of an abandoned monastery. These sights trouble him, stirring dim memories at the edge of sleep. Jack knows never to speak of the misted events of his sloughed-away past, and as they continue south (it is days before he wonders why merchants don't ride) the recollection of monks driven forth, horsemen wheeling angrily, and ragged crowds waving sticks fill his dreams, spurring his impulse to keep moving, put distance between himself and the tall stone structures that loom in his memory's mist.

They spend only a day at port and leave by night, which tells Jack all he needs to know about the nature of this venture. After crossing a stomach-tossing sea, they alight on a darkened coast, unload sacks on the beach, and take on bales after murmured converse with shadowy figures. The ship docks next day at Le Havre, but Jack never learns what becomes of its cargo, for he is taken by two of his partners to a tavern and bid watch the door as they meet with others within.

Until he learns the language, Jack is like a toiling ass, that obeys its master without comprehending his speech with others. No questions are asked him, and his only requital is the ass's: that he is fed.

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The foreigners' tongue yields its meaning only word by slow word, but Jack survives by reading faces, intonations, and the logic of the moment. It is a land of nothing familiar, where friars walk the streets like plump capons, villages are the size of market towns, and authority is everywhere. Ecclesiastical or seigniorial, its charge is ubiquitous, as though gold held the power of lodestones. The land is tax-ridden but people still need salt, needles, sometimes lace and ribbons. Jack carries loads and stands by during transactions, is taught little but learns withal. Conning is slow while cunning must be quick.

Jack dislikes voyages by water, during which he can see his death, so remains in the towns, with their crowded anonymity and city pleasures. It is a world at times comprehensible (men's appetites and frailties do not change with their tongues) and at times cast upside-down: the flurry of laws and regulations, which bind the poor

man, the farmer, and even the prosperous bourgeois, have left the modest fraternity of corn untouched, and their cost may rise unchecked as any bishop. Bakers labor under strict laws and may not raise their prices, but the loaves themselves can shrink as grain grows scarce, shriveling and hardening as they approach the condition of stones.

English prices soar in time of dearth, but there is something different here, though Jack cannot figure out how. He labors for his merchant masters, inherits their cast-off clothes, and after an eventual falling out continues on his own. He has learned to deal in cash, which fascinates him. Gold and silver have flooded into Christendom, from the cities and mines of distant lands. They pay for everything, including blackamoor slaves taken to other lands, from which sugar, tobacco and maize appear. Sugar and maize you can put in your stomach or sell for cash, which pays for everything. Listening to merchants discourse in taverns, Jack hears this and marvels, even as brown bread softer than he once imagined white could be rests on a plate before him, sliced rather than torn, and oft smeared with gold-colored butter.

A cold winter hones the edge of hunger, but it is the wet spring that fans the fear. Prices for grain—here called *bled*—begin to rise even before it is clear that the rains have sufficed to stunt or mildew it, and when the summer barley comes off the field it is not sent to market: noblemen, chapter-houses, millers, and the larger farmers hold onto their stores, waiting for the price to rise further.

This scarcity drives prices aloft like startled birds, and the market loaves cringe in response. Hungry peasants begin streaming into town, and are driven back through the gates. Jack, seeing his expenditures rise, knows he must venture out into the countryside, whence comes the produce that feeds and clothes the towns.

The *chasse-coquins* stare suspiciously as Jack strolls through, but their charge is to keep the poor out, not foreigners in. Solitary travelers look vulnerable, but Jack keeps to well-trafficked roads, conducts his business in busy market squares or the front rooms of inns, and is out of sight by nightfall. Other merchants have heavier pockets, but Jack moves faster, making small transactions quickly with coin kept on his person. Like a grain smaller than the gap between millstones, he moves through the workings unmarked.

Jack is used to avoiding the hand of authority, but discovers that its absence also grasps. Forestalling—the buying up of grain before the markets open—is not forbidden here, and it sweeps through villages like an invisible hand, gathering up what is suddenly precious. Jack had always assumed that grain was bound to the earth, to be consumed near the land that yielded it up. Here *bled* is like water, that can flow freely to reach its natural level: that being where the most gold lies. Such dissolution, as though by channels invisibly scored, draws the very substance of bread irresistibly through the peasants' desperate fingers.

And as the bread flees the land, the countryside rebels. Throughout the



summer it is war, as merchants seek to move their grain to higher-paying markets and the *paysans*, like headless armies, mobilize to prevent its leaving their county. Jack is traveling these weeks, and discovers that regrating is not only permitted, but is enforced by the Crown when the merchants are able to appeal for armed escorts. Disbelievingly Jack watches the *marechaussee* charging bands of thirty or more peasants armed with staves and pitchforks as merchants quickly load their sacks onto boats and push off downriver.

“Fewer customers?” he asks the innkeeper that night, for his tables are nearly empty. The man regards Jack without warmth, as though the ambivalence of his position were mirrored in the less than reputable-looking foreigner. The cost of bread has doubled for him as for everyone else, but the troubles have brought traders to his place, and he feels little affinity with the violent peasants in the fields.

“They will return for the harvest,” he says shortly.

When harvest comes, the large farmers hire fewer hands. There has been little work all summer, for the towns that purchase the countryside’s labor must now pay more for *le pain*, so can afford less of all else. The superfluity of workers drives down the wages of those who are hired.

These processes, running in train like an irresistible mechanism, first catch up the poorest, then the rest. By fall the peasants are seeking anything to put in their grain: chestnuts, millet, cabbage stumps and discarded husks, acorns not yet found by pigs, half-germinated seeds from their own small plots. Peasants mix darnel and hemp with their dwindling corn, and produce bread that makes them stagger and reel. As hunger turns to starvation, their skin begins to bruise black.

Jack would not scruple to haul bushels from the parish, but his practice lies elsewhere. A moonless night finds him at a crossroads watching as sacks are unloaded from a wagon and packed onto quiet horses. The sacks contain grain, their contents inspected by the buyer in a barn where Jack led him ten hours before; Jack has kept watch over them since. He is paid not on the spot but upon presentation of a receipt hours later and miles away.

“Gold for paper,” remarks the trader, folding the scrap Jack gave him and tucking it away. His table is covered with papers, which he must hold close to his face to read in the early dawn.

“Paper is not gold,” Jack replies shortly. He only agreed to defer immediate payment because he knows the trader plans more purchases and shall need his assistance.

“You think not?” asks the trader. “Here is a kind of cash,” he says, picking up a sheet. “It is the receipt given a landowner when his grain goes to the warehouse.” There is an amount specified; Jack can see the number. It is not the price the

landowner was paid, but rather what he wants for the grain, for which it shall eventually be sold. The paper is itself of value: the landowner has sold it, like gold.

Jack smells a gull: the man who accepts bills for cash will soon find himself holding trash, his labors and payment fled. He suggests to the trader what a man left clutching such paper might do with it.

“You are wrong there, my friend,” says the trader with a smile, as though to suggest that he who lives as a rat in the granary should not expect to understand the owner’s dealings. He explains that credit may connect seller to buyer when their lines are too short to meet. With credit—the assurance of gold, though it not be present—enterprises might expand, ventures find footing. Wealth that resides only in land cannot move, but credit can spread like knowledge, allowing at last money to grow.

“Then you are a Jew,” exclaims Jack, at last understanding.

The trader bursts into laughter. “What century do you live in?” he asks.

Jack does not trouble to answer that, for his country and time are unchanging. He lives in the land of *le pain*, without frontiers or landmarks save for the mill, the market, and the city gates.

In time Jack comes to buy and sell, though only in small, swift transactions. Sellers and merchants are not anxious to travel to meet, and Jack moves between them, first as courier then as agent.

Sometimes they write letters, which Jack conveys. He cannot read them, but the faces of the recipients as they scan them tell him enough. He is never cheated, and the grain spills quietly, some lodging in his pocket.

One afternoon he hears a mother sing to quiet her fretful babe:

—

*“Our land is called poverty,*

*Where one does the dance of hunger.*

You have milk now, but where shall come your bread?

*Taller you may grow, thinner surely.”*

—

A winter blaze crackles in the fireplace. Sitting before it as snowflakes fall

through the night sky, Jack thinks briefly of children and mothers. It is difficult to remember that he once stole crusts and hid quaking.

“It is an old system,” the trader tells him, the last time Jack sees him. “The tenant’s share of his crop is too small for him to afford improvements, so the landlord’s share also remains scant. But it comes to him without labor; and it is moreover a difficult thing to combine fields and enjoy the resultant economies. Driving tenants off land brings difficulties: and not just angry peasants. Like the Earl of Leicester, remember? Who enclosed his fields, and later said in remorse: ‘I am like the ogre in the old tale, and have eaten up my neighbors.’”

Jack starts at this, but only for a moment, as the tale has none to do with him. You don’t eat up the one who escaped.

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Jack rarely eats fancy bread: it pleases him more to get good brown bread, not the kind here called *cannine* but the better quality, and eat it sliced thick with drippings. The innkeeper tells him that such barley bread is so called because many years ago it was judged good enough only for sheepdogs. They laugh at this together.

These days Jack rides, as beggars do not. Vagrants cannot accost a mounted man, although he once has to lash at the face of one who tries to seize his reins. What he sees mostly on the road are children: beggars sent wandering by parents with families too large to feed, and all less fortunate still. They look up beseechingly but offer no threat. Did Jack’s taste run to boys, he might have his fill.

One he sees as he stops to drink at a stream. Jack has pulled off his boots to cool his feet, and is sitting at his ease, eyes half-closed, before he sees the boy standing in the bush. At first he supposes an attempted ambush, but then realizes that the whelp is simply too slight—too *faible*, as they say—to notice immediately.

“*Abandonne par tes parents?*” he asks lazily, pulling his boots closer.

The boy simply watches him. The fact that he does not shift his gaze past Jack tells him that he has no confederates nearby.

“They are good boots,” he tells the boy. “You are right to covet them.” He wishes to draw attention from his saddlebag, where the gold is. It occurs to Jack that the gold he is carrying constitutes, in a sense, the corn that this boy has not eaten, whose lack broke his family apart.

The boy’s attention, however, is fixed upon Jack’s wallet. “Do you have any bread?” he asks at last.

Of course Jack has bread in his wallet, and meat besides. “There was bread in

my stomach this morning,” he answers. “But where is it now?”

“Shit along the road,” the boy replies.

Jack realizes the boy is older than he looks, meaning small for his age. “Older brothers, eh?” he asks. “Too many competing mouths.”

It is his third question, but the boy has answered only the second. He does not look as though he could last long on his own, so must have been cast off recently. There is no sign of emotion on his face, only a certain cunning, which did not this time avail him.

“The boots would have bought you food, had you got them,” Jack says. “You have to snatch fast, if you would rob an ogre.” As he returns to the road, he sees a stretch of stone wall beyond the trees farther downstream. An old mill, where stone teeth grind the farmer’s grain (and swallow much of it), or a monastery, where the flour rests comfortably? Neither holds terrors for Jack.

A cold wind rises, but Jack’s coat is leather. You need not answer riddles to survive, for riddles only answer what others think to pose, and it is what they don’t think that you must know.

Jack once heard a riddle, and now knows the answer. Though the heart is closer to the stomach, it is the head that feeds it. All else is fairy gold and melts into air: the realm of mere wind and words, the province of the *faible*.