

Boots And His Brothers

by Sir George Webbe Dasent
from *Popular Tales from the Norse*

Once on a time there was a man who had three sons, Peter, Paul, and John. John was Boots, of course, because he was the youngest. I can't say the man had anything more than these three sons, for he hadn't one penny to rub against another; and so he told his sons over and over again they must go out into the world and try to earn their bread, for there at home there was nothing to be looked for but starving to death.

Now, a bit off the man's cottage was the king's palace, and you must know, just against the king's windows a great oak had sprung up, which was so stout and big that it took away all the light from the king's palace. The King had said he would give many, many dollars to the man who could fell the oak, but no one was man enough for that, for as soon as ever one chip of the oak's trunk flew off, two grew in its stead. A well, too, the King had dug, which was to hold water for the whole year; for all his neighbours had wells, but he hadn't any, and that he thought a shame. So the King said he would give any one who could dig him such a well as would hold water for a whole year round, both money and goods; but no one could do it, for the King's palace lay high, high up on a hill, and they hadn't dug a few inches before they came upon the living rock.

But as the King had set his heart on having these two things done, he had it given out far and wide, in all the churches of his kingdom, that he who could fell the big oak in the king's court-yard, and get him a well that would hold water the whole year round, should have the Princess and half the kingdom. Well! you may easily know there was many a man who came to try his luck; but for all their hacking and hewing, and all their digging and delving, it was no good. The oak got bigger and stouter at every stroke, and the rock didn't get softer either. So one day those three brothers thought they'd set off and try too, and their father hadn't a word against it; for even if they didn't get the Princess and half the kingdom, it might happen they might get a place somewhere with a good master; and that was all he wanted. So when the brothers said they thought of going to the palace, their father said 'yes' at once. So Peter, Paul, and Jack went off from their home.

Well! they hadn't gone far before they came to a fir wood, and up along one side of it rose a steep hill-side, and as they went, they heard something hewing and hacking away up on-the hill among the trees.

'I wonder now what it is that is hewing away up yonder?' said Jack.

'You're always so clever with your wonderings', said Peter and Paul both at once. 'What wonder is it, pray, that a woodcutter should stand and hack up on a hill-side?'

'Still, I'd like to see what it is, after all', said Jack; and up he went.

'Oh, if you're such a child, 'twill do you good to go and take a lesson', bawled out his brothers after him.

But Jack didn't care for what they said; he climbed the steep hill- side towards where the noise came, and when he reached the place, what do you think he saw? why, an axe that stood there hacking and hewing, all of itself, at the trunk of a fir.

'Good day!' said Jack. 'So you stand here all alone and hew, do you?'

'Yes; here I've stood and hewed and hacked a long long time, waiting for you', said the Axe.

'Well, here I am at last', said Jack, as he took the axe, pulled it off its haft, and stuffed both head and haft into his wallet.

So when he got down again to his brothers, they began to jeer and laugh at him.

'And now, what funny thing was it you saw up yonder on the hill-side?' they said.

'Oh, it was only an axe we heard', said Jack.

So when they had gone a bit farther, they came under a steep spur of rock, and up there they heard something digging and shovelling.

'I wonder now,' said Jack, 'what it is digging and shovelling up yonder at the top of the rock.'

'Ah, you're always so clever with your wonderings', said Peter and Paul again, 'as if you'd never heard a woodpecker hacking and pecking at a hollow tree.'

'Well, well', said Jack, 'I think it would be a piece of fun just to see what it really is.'

And so off he set to climb the rock, while the others laughed and made game of him. But he didn't care a bit for that; up he clomb, and when he got near the top, what do you think he saw? Why, a spade that stood there digging and delving.

'Good day!' said Jack. 'So you stand here all alone, and dig and delve!'

'Yes, that's what I do', said the Spade, 'and that's what I've done this many a long day, waiting for you.'

'Well, here I am', said Jack again, as he took the spade and knocked it off its handle, and put it into his wallet, and then down again to his brothers.

'Well, what was it, so rare and strange', said Peter and Paul, 'that you saw up there at the top of the rock?'

'Oh,', said Jack, 'nothing more than a spade; that was what we heard.'

So they went on again a good bit, till they came to a brook. They were thirsty, all three, after their long walk, and so they lay down beside the brook to have a drink.

'I wonder now', said Jack, 'where all this water comes from.'

'I wonder if you're right in your head', said Peter and Paul, in one breath. 'If you're not mad already, you'll go mad very soon, with your wonderings. Where the brook comes from, indeed! Have you never heard how water rises from a spring in the earth?'

'Yes! but still I've a great fancy to see where this brook comes from', said Jack.

So up alongside the brook he went, in spite of all that his brothers bawled after him. Nothing could stop him. On he went. So, as he went

up and up, the brook got smaller and smaller, and at last, a little way farther on, what do you think he saw? Why, a great walnut, and out of that the water trickled.

'Good-day!' said Jack again. 'So you lie here, and trickle and run down all alone?'

'Yes, I do,' said the Walnut; 'and here have I trickled and run this many a long day, waiting for you.'

'Well, here I am', said Jack, as he took up a lump of moss and plugged up the hole, that the water mightn't run out. Then he put the walnut into his wallet, and ran down to his brothers.

'Well now', said Peter and Paul, 'have you found out where the water comes from? A rare sight it must have been!'

'Oh, after all, it was only a hole it ran out of', said Jack; and so the others laughed and made game of him again, but Jack didn't mind that a bit.

'After all, I had the fun of seeing it', said he. So when they had gone a bit farther, they came to the king's palace; but as every one in the kingdom had heard how they might win the Princess and half the realm, if they could only fell the big oak and dig the king's well, so many had come to try their luck that the oak was now twice as stout and big as it had been at first, for two chips grew for every one they hewed out with their axes, as I daresay you all bear in mind. So the King had now laid it down as a punishment, that if any one tried and couldn't fell the oak, he should be put on a barren island, and both his ears were to be clipped off. But the two brothers didn't let themselves be scared by that; they were quite sure they could fell the oak, and Peter, as he was eldest, was to try his hand first; but it went with him as with all the rest who had hewn at the oak; for every chip he cut out, two grew in its place. So the king's men seized him, and clipped off both his ears, and put him out on the island.

Now Paul, he was to try his luck, but he fared just the same; when he had hewn two or three strokes, they began to see the oak grow, and so the king's men seized him too, and clipped his ears, and put him out on the island; and his ears they clipped closer, because they said he ought to have taken a lesson from his brother.

So now Jack was to try.

'If you *will* look like a marked sheep, we're quite ready to clip your ears at once, and then you'll save yourself some bother', said the King; for he was angry with him for his brothers' sake.

'Well, I'd like just to try first', said Jack, and so he got leave. Then he took his axe out of his wallet and fitted it to its haft.

'Hew away!' said he to his axe; and away it hewed, making the chips fly again, so that it wasn't long before down came the oak.

When that was done, Jack pulled out his spade, and fitted it to its handle.

'Dig away!' said he to the spade; and so the spade began to dig and delve till the earth and rock flew out in splinters, and so he had the well soon dug out, you may think.

And when he had got it as big and deep as he chose, Jack took out his walnut and laid it in one corner of the well, and pulled the plug of moss out.

'Trickle and run', said Jack; and so the nut trickled and ran, till the water gushed out of the hole in a stream, and in a short time the well was brimfull.

Then Jack had felled the oak which shaded the king's palace, and dug a well in the palace-yard, and so he got the Princess and half the kingdom, as the King had said; but it was lucky for Peter and Paul that they had lost their ears, else they had heard each hour and day, how every one said, 'Well, after all, Jack wasn't so much out of his mind when he took to wondering.'