JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

Once upon a time there was a poor widow who lived with her son Jack in a little house. Their wealth consisted solely of a milking cow. When the cow had grown too old, the mother sent Jack to sell it. On his way to the market, the boy met a stranger. "I will give you five magic beans for your cow," the stranger offered. Jack was unsure and hesitated for a while but then, enticed by the idea of such an extraordinary deal, he decided to accept. When he returned home, his mother was furious and reprimanded him sternly:

"You fool! What have you done? We needed the money to buy a calf. Now we don't have anything and we are even poorer." Jack felt guilty and sad. "Only a fool would exchange a cow for five beans," his mother fumed. Then, at the height of her exasperation, she threw the five beans out of the window and sent Jack to bed with no dinner. The morning after, when he stepped outside, Jack saw an amazing sight. A gigantic beanstalk, reaching far into the clouds, had grown overnight. "The beans must have really been magic," Jack thought happily. Being very curious, the boy climbed the plant and once he reached the top of the stalk he found himself over the clouds. While looking around in amazement, Jack saw a huge castle of gray stone. "I wonder who lives there," he thought. Jack was very surprised to see a path leading to the castle. He cautiously stepped on the clouds and, when he saw that they held him up, he walked to the castle. As he stood in front of the huge gate, his curiosity increased. He knocked several times on the gigantic door, but no one came to open it. Jack noticed that the door wasn’t locked. With great effort, he was able to push it until it creaked open. "What are you doing here?" a thundering voice asked. The biggest woman he had ever seen was scowling at him. Jack could only mutter: "I am lost. May I have something to eat? I am very hungry." The woman, who did not have children, looked at him a little more kindly: "Come in, quick. I will give you a bowl of milk. But be careful because my husband, the ogre, eats children. If you hear him coming, hide at once." Jack was shaking with fear but, nonetheless, he went inside. The milk the woman gave him was very good and Jack had almost finished drinking it when they heard a tremendous noise. The ogre was home. "Fee! fo! fun! I smell the blood of an Englishman!" the ogre shouted. "Hide, quick!" the woman whispered, pushing Jack into the oven. "Do I smell a child in this room?" the ogre asked suspiciously, sniffing and looking around all. "A child?" the woman repeated. "You see and hear children everywhere. That’s all you ever think about. Sit down and I’ll make your dinner." The ogre, still grumbling, filled a jug of wine and drank it all with his dinner. After having counted again and again all the gold pieces of his treasure, the ogre fell asleep with his feet propped up on the table. After a little while, his thundering snoring echoed throughout the castle. The ogre’s wife went to prepare the ogre’s bed and Jack, who had sneaked out to the oven, saw the gold pieces on the table and filled a little bag full of them. "I hope he won't see me, otherwise he'll eat me whole," Jack thought while shivering with fear. Jack’s heart was beating faster, not just faster because he feared the ogre but because he was very excited. Thanks to all the gold coins, he and his mother would be rich. Jack ran down the path over the clouds. Jack arrived at the top of the giant beanstalk and began to descend as quickly as possible, hanging on the leaves and the branches. When he finally reached the ground, he found his mother waiting for him. The poor woman had been worried sick since his disappearance. She had been frightened by the giant beanstalk. When she saw Jack come down and then triumphantly hold up the bag full of gold, she burst out crying: "Where have you been, my son? Do you want me to die worrying? What kind of plant is this? What . . ." Jack cheerfully interrupted her, emptying the contents of the bag before her. "You see, I did the right thing exchanging that cow for the magic beans. Now I’ll tell you the whole story ..." And Jack told his mother everything that had happened in detail. In the days that followed, the widow’s humble house was made into a comfortable home. The gold pieces were spent to buy a lot of things Jack and his mother never had before. Mother and son were very happy. But as time went by, so did the money. When the last gold piece had been spent, Jack decided to go back to the castle above the clouds. This time the boy went inside through the kitchen and hid once again in the oven. Shortly after, the ogre came in and began to sniff about. "I smell children," he said to his wife. But since she had seen no one come in, she didn’t pay any attention to him. After dinner, the ogre placed a hen on the table. The hen laid golden eggs. Jack saw the miraculous hen from a crack in the oven door. He waited for the ogre to fall asleep, jumped out of the oven, snatched the hen and ran out of the castle. The hen’s squawking, however, woke up the ogre. "Thief! Thief!" he shouted. But Jack was already far away. Once again, he found his mother anxiously waiting for him at the foot of the beanstalk. "Is that all you stole? A hen?" she asked Jack, disappointed. But Jack ran, happy, to the courtyard. "Just wait," he said to his mother. As a matter of fact, a little while later the hen laid a golden egg and continued to lay such an egg every single day after that. By now, Jack and his mother were very wealthy. Their house was completely rebuilt. Teams of carpenters replaced the roof, added new rooms and elegant marble columns. Then they bought paintings, tapestries, Persian rugs, mirrors and many other beautiful furnishings. Their miserable shack was transformed into a luxurious home. Jack and his mother had not forgotten their previous years of poverty and deprivation. So they chose to welcome any traveler who needed food or shelter. But wealth doesn’t always bring happiness. Jack’s mother suddenly fell ill or so it seemed. But not one of the many doctors who visited her could discover what her illness was. The woman was sad, ate less and less and showed no interest in life. She rarely smiled, and then only when Jack was near to her. Her son tried to cheer her up, but nothing could save the mother from her slow but inevitable decline. Even a circus’s famous clown, who had been invited especially for her entertainment, received only a sad greeting. Jack was desperate and didn’t know what to do. All the hen’s gold was not enough to make his mother well again. So he had another idea. "What if I went back to the ogre’s castle? Maybe there I could find the answer," he thought. He shivered with fear thinking about the giant’s huge hands and mouth, but the hope of helping his mother encouraged him to face the danger again. One evening he gathered all his courage and climbed once more the giant beanstalk. This time he entered the castle through an open window. He sneaked in the darkness to the kitchen and hid inside a huge pot until the following day. After dinner the ogre went to get his magic harp, an instrument that sang and played marvellous music. While listening to the harp’s sweet melody, the ogre fell asleep. In his hiding place, Jack was captivated by the harp’s song as well. When he finally heard the ogre snore loudly, he lifted the pot’s lid and saw the extraordinary instrument: a golden harp. He quickly climbed on the table and ran away with the harp in his hands. The instrument woke up the ogre screaming: "Master, master! Wake up! A thief is taking me away!" The ogre woke up suddenly, was disoriented for a couple of seconds but then realized what was happening and began chasing Jack. The boy ran as fast as he could and the ogre kept calling out. "Shut up! Shut up! If you’ll play for me, you’ll be happier," Jack kept telling it breathlessly. He finally arrived to where the leafy top of the beanstalk poked through the clouds. Jack crept along the ground and slipped down the stalk quietly. The harp did not make a sound and the ogre didn’t see Jack go down the plant. When Jack got down to earth he called to his mother, "Look what I’ve brought you!" The harp began to play an enchanting melody and his mother smiled.
Once upon a time . . . a tiny mosquito started to buzz round a lion he met. "Go away!" grumbled the sleepy lion, smacking his own cheek in an attempt to drive the insect away. "Why should I?" demanded the mosquito. "You're king of the jungle, not of the air! I'll fly wherever I want and land wherever I please." And so saying, he tickled the lion's ear. In the hope of crushing the insect, the lion boxed his own ears, but the mosquito slipped away from the now dazed lion. "I don't feel it any more. Either it's squashed or it's gone away." But at that very moment, the irritating buzz began again, and the mosquito flew into the lion's nose. Wild with rage, the lion leapt to his hind legs and started to rain punches on his own nose. But the insect, safe inside, refused to budge. With a swollen nose and watery eyes, the lion gave a terrific sneeze, blasting the mosquito out. Angry at being dislodged so abruptly, the mosquito returned to the attack: BUZZ . . . BUZZZ! . . . it whizzed around the lion's head. Large and tough as the lion was, he could not rid himself of his tiny tormenter. This made him angrier still, and he roared fiercely. At the sound of his terrible voice, all the forest creatures fled in fear, but paying no heed to the exhausted lion, the mosquito sang triumphantly: "There you are, king of the jungle! Foiled by a tiny mosquito like me!" And highly delighted with his victory, off he buzzed. But he did not notice a spider's web hanging close by, and soon he was turning and twisting, trying to escape from the trap set by a large spider. "Bahi!" said the spider in disgust, as he ate it. "Another tiny mosquito. Not much to get excited about, but better than nothing. I was hoping for something more substantial..." And that's what became of the mosquito that foiled the lion!

THE LION AND THE MOSQUITO

Once upon a time . . . a lion decided to go to war. He summoned his ministers, and called together his army with this proclamation: "King Lion commands that all animals in the forest must come before him tomorrow to go to war. Nobody must fail to appear." The lion's subjects all presented themselves punctually and the lion issued the orders: "Elephant, you're the largest, you'll transport the guns and all the supplies. You, fox, have a reputation for cunning, so you'll help me draw up the plans of battle to beat off enemy attacks. You, monkey, nimble and good at climbing trees, will act as lookout and spy the enemy's movements from above. Bear, you're strong and agile, so you'll scale the fortress walls and terrorize the enemy." Amongst those present were also the rabbit and the donkey. When the king's ministers saw them, they shook their heads, then one said: "Sire, I don't think the donkey will make a good soldier. They say he is easily frightened." The lion looked at the donkey, then turning to his ministers, he remarked: "He brays louder than I can roar. He'll stay at my side and be the trumpet that will rally the troops." The ministers then pointed to the rabbit: "He's even more nervous than the donkey. We should send him home!" Again the lion stood thoughtfully for a moment, then going over to the rabbit he said: "You always flee from your enemies, so you've learned that you have to be faster than the others if you're to survive. So you'll act as messenger, and within seconds, all the soldiers will receive my orders." Then, turning to the crowd, he said: "Everyone can make himself useful in a war; everyone can help the common cause at best he is able!"

THE LITTLE GOLDEN BIRD

Once upon a time . . . several Buddhist monks lived in a great temple that stood in a magnificent garden full of flowers and rare plants. The monks spent their days contentedly in prayer and meditation, and the beauty of their surroundings was all they needed to make them forget the world. Then one day, something happened to change their life in this peaceful corner, making the days seem shorter and not so monotonous. No longer did they live peacefully together, indeed they started to quarrel. But what had happened? A young monk had arrived, upsetting their lives by telling them all about the outside world beyond the garden wall. He told them about cities, the bright lights, everyday life full of entertainments and pleasure. And when the monks heard about this different world, they no longer wanted to remain in what had, till then, seemed paradise, but now turned into a lonely existence. With the young monk as their leader, first one group then another left the temple. Weeds began to sprout on the paths and the temple was almost deserted. Then the last five monks, torn between their love for the sacred spot and the wish to see the new world they'd heard about, sadly got ready to leave. But just as they were about to turn their backs on the temple, a golden bird, dangling five long white strings, fluttered over their heads. Each monk felt himself drawn to clasp one of the strings, and suddenly the little group found itself carried away to the land of their dreams. And there, they saw the outside world as it really was, full of hate, misery and violence, a world without scruples, where peace was forever banned. It was a long journey, and when the golden bird brought them back to the temple garden, they decided never to leave it again. Three times the bird circled overhead before it vanished into the sky. And the monks knew then that Buddha had come to help them find the pathway to true happiness.

THE LITTLE MATCHGIRL

Once upon a time . . . a little girl tried to make a living by selling matches in the street. It was New Year's Eve and the snow-clad streets were deserted. From brightly lit windows came the tinkle of laughter and the sound of singing. People were getting ready to bring in the New Year. But the poor little match seller sat sadly beside the fountain. Her ragged dress and worn shawl did not keep out the cold and she tried to keep her bare feet from touching the frozen ground. She hadn't sold one box of matches all day and she was frightened to go home, for her father would certainly be angry. It wouldn't be much warmer anyway, in the draughty attic that was her home. The little girl's fingers were stiff with cold. If only she could light a match! But what would her father say at