

# Jack Has a Dream

This is a story about a boy who was so haunted by a mountain that it gave him bad dreams. You may have had bad dreams when you were Jack's age, but not like these.

In Jack's dream, he would be somewhere in the valley, maybe trying to throw a stone across the river. Where Jack lived, the Imperial River ran quick and cold, sparkling and chuckling, over a rocky bed with stones worn smooth as eggs. Lush green grass like a carpet, spattered with tiny purple flowers, grew right up to the water's edge. And the mountains towered over it; for Jack lived in a valley.

So he would be throwing stones, or looking for blackberries, all by himself as usual, when suddenly the mountain would begin to sing.

It was always the biggest mountain, Bell Mountain, with its peak hidden in a cloak of clouds so that no one ever saw it. Jack had never in his life heard the sound of a really big bell, or he might have said the mountain rang, not sang.

But it was a terrible song that made the other mountains tremble and filled the whole valley as if God had flooded it to the foothills with ice water. Jack couldn't hear the noise of the river anymore, nor the wind, the birds, nor his own heart beating. Indeed, it seemed the river stopped

flowing and his heart stopped beating. And he was too terrified to pick up his feet and run away—too terrified even to breathe.

And then he would wake up.

As his breath came back to him, he would always find that he was still frightened: scared enough to shiver. But on top of being frightened, and running deeper than the fear, was something else.

He would always catch himself straining his ears to hear more—hungry for more, thirsty for more, more of the mountain's singing.

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“Jack! Burn you for a lazy imp—wake up and get busy.”

That was Van, Jack's stepfather. Jack's father, Vill, died in a war when Jack was just a baby. His mother was dead now, too, leaving him all alone with Van, who would just as soon not have him.

“I'm coming,” Jack said, and crawled off the pallet he slept on. It was stuffed with ferns and moss and leaves, and it crackled every time he moved.

“I have to go down to Caristun today. His honor the chief has bought some new furniture.” Van was a carter. He worked for the village council. “I want you to clean up around here. I'm tired of looking at a mess. And bring in another load of firewood. Too cuss't cold at night for this time of year.”

As if he could go to Caristun and back in one day, Jack thought. He'd need a magic chariot for that—not a creaking old cart with a single bad-tempered ox to pull it.

Van was just finishing up his breakfast and packing some buttered bread in his scrip to eat along the way. He was a short, stubby man with a stubby black beard and stubby black hairs on his arms and hands.

Jack couldn't remember his father and had never seen a picture of him. Mother said he looked like his father. He remembered her as a frail, pretty lady, never in the best of health: lying in her bed for half a year, promising to get better, and finally dying there. Whatever made her decide to marry Van?

Jack was not frail, and he was already getting almost as tall as Van. He had his mother's eyes, deep blue, and a shock of glossy black hair, which she used to say was like Vill's hair. Poor Vill, who went marching out with a spear on his shoulder, singing, and never came back. He lay buried a little north of Lintum Forest, where the raiders killed him.

"There's some tack in the shed that needs seeing to," Van said. "I don't suppose you've done it yet."

"I'll do it before you get back."

"It ain't like I pile work on you. Little enough you have to do to earn your keep. There's kids your age as is already let out to be shepherds, and that's what they have to do all day, every day—until the Heathen get 'em, or outlaws, or some wolves. You could at least do your chores."

Whenever Van grumbled like this, it meant he was ready to leave and just putting it off for another minute or two. Lately he grumbled a lot when he had to go as far as Caristun. Jack never talked back to him. Getting hit by Van would hurt, but it wasn't fear of getting hit that made Jack behave. He knew somehow that Van would love it if he gave him some sass, and an excuse to beat him. He knew Van

hated it when he acted as if he respected him—hated it and couldn't find a way to punish him for it.

"I'm off," Van said, snatching his hat and cloak from the peg on the wall. "Mind you do your chores."

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Jack did do his chores and would have liked it better if he'd had more of them. Van was proud of his home—a four-room cottage, each room smaller than the next—but as small as it was, it didn't take a lot of cleaning. Van always wanted the plaster and the floors kept clean in case he had company.

Most of the houses in the village of Ninneburky were just as small. The village itself was more than grand enough to be a town: a real town, with an archon and a seat on the Oligarchy. It had more people and newer and better buildings than the town of Caristun, to whose archon the village paid dues.

One thing Caristun had, which Ninneburky didn't have, that made all the difference—a wall of dressed stone to defend it. Ninneburky made do with a stockade of timber. There was nothing quite so costly these days (Van said) as a defensive wall, what with stonecutters, masons, laborers, the stone itself, and the cost of getting it there. Ninneburky might have its own new Chamber of the Temple, lovely fine houses for all the members of the council, a livery stable, and a militia that drilled with spears, with a real sergeant to instruct them—but it did not yet have a wall of stone. The chief councilor swore he'd build a wall and be an archon, or die trying. To that end the dues on craftsmen, loggers, shopkeepers, carters, marketers, and herdsmen were

rather high. Jack knew because Van complained about it frequently.

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In the afternoon he went to the chamber to see his teacher, Ashrof. Jack used to go to him to be taught his letters. The old man was Mother's great-uncle, and Jack had had to promise her that he'd see him. She was the only family Ashrof had in Ninneburky.

Jack didn't think there was a word for "your mother's great-uncle." But after Mother died, Jack came to think of the old man as the only family he had—more family than Van would ever be, at least. Besides, Ashrof had more to teach than letters.

Jack saw him come out of the chamber building with another one of his pupils—the stuck-up little stink who was the chief councilor's daughter. The chamber was going to open a regular school soon, where all the children who needed to learn their letters could learn them at the same time, probably from someone younger than Ashrof. Until then, Ashrof taught those who came to him.

Jack stopped and the girl walked right past him as if he weren't there at all: didn't even look at him. For two bits he'd trip her. Then she'd look.

"Bucket! What's the matter?"

Jack's mother called him Bucket as a pet name. She said it was the first word he learned how to say, after "Ma-ma," and he used to say it so much that it'd make her laugh. Now Ashrof called him Bucket. No one else did. Jack turned and joined him by the bench next to the chamber door.

"That girl makes me want to stick a moth up her nose," Jack said.

“Poor Ellayne!” Ashrof said. But his white beard jiggled, which meant he was chuckling under it. He dropped himself on the bench and patted the boards. “Sit down by me a while. The day’s finally warmed up enough to enjoy a bit of sun.

“You mustn’t mind Ellayne. Her mother wants her to grow up to be a great lady in Obann, an archon’s daughter. Her father would sell his soul to go to Obann and be the archon—but he hates the very thought of his daughter living there. It will never be possible for Ellayne to please both her mother and her father.”

“She acts like I’m not here,” Jack said.

“Her head has been filled with a great deal of foolishness,” Ashrof said. “Now how about your head, eh?”

“I know what you mean. Yes, I had the dream again last night. Why won’t it go away? Whoever heard of having dreams about a mountain? A mountain’s just there. It doesn’t matter.”

*“King Ozias said, I shall hang a bell atop Mount Yul, and when it shall be rungen, maybe the Lord shall hear. And Penda the prophet said, He shall surely hear.”*

Ashrof had his eye on the mountain now, Bell Mountain. It seemed he was reciting the words not to Jack, but to the mountain. Bell Mountain, with its rocky shoulders, its snowy shields gleaming as the sun began to decline westward, and the perpetual clouds that masked its crown—it towered over the valley. Anyone in town could simply look up and see it. Until he’d started having the dreams, Jack never gave it a thought. It was just there. It had nothing to do with anything in his life.

“What was that you said?” Jack asked.

“A bit of Scripture—the real Scripture, from the Old Books.” Ashrof continued to study the mountain. “Not much call for the Old Books nowadays. There are presters who have never read them.

“But I have. I knew there was something about your dream that reminded me of a verse I used to know long ago. It took me a long time to find that verse.

“It’s from the Record of Penda, 50th fascicle, verse 16: the part that tells how the last rightful king of Obann, King Ozias, had to flee his refuge in the forest—the one we still call Oziah’s Wood. How some of his followers betrayed him to his enemies. They thought he’d try to make for Lintum Forest because he was born there; but he tricked them again. He went up the mountain, which in those days was called Mount Yul, or Mount Cloud.” He pointed to the mountain and finally looked back down at Jack.

“The Scripture doesn’t say whether he ever got to the top of the mountain and put a bell up there. No one ever saw him again, dead or alive. And after him there were no more kings. Just the long years of the Interregnum, out of which arose the Empire—God forgive us!”

Jack didn’t know how to answer. Ashrof had taught him a little about some of these things. He knew there was an Empire, with the city of Obann as its capital, a very, very long time ago. And that the Old Books of Scripture were even older than the Empire. That was about all he knew.

“Why did you say ‘God forgive us’?”

“Because the Empire was hopelessly corrupt and wicked, and God destroyed it,” Ashrof said. “Obann’s Empire ruled the world. Up and down the coast of the Great Sea, and many islands far out to sea. Down to the deserts of the

south, and far to the north, well beyond the River Winter. Wasn't so cold up there in those days. And way out east beyond the mountains. Obann conquered all the Heathen lands out to the Great Lakes. It was a bigger world then, Bucket, and the whole world did homage to the Empire.

"But God destroyed it, all in one day, the Day of Fire foretold by all the prophets. Nobody knew what they meant, you see. There was no Empire yet, while the prophets were alive, and wouldn't be for hundreds of years. So no one believed, and no one listened. Nevertheless, God did destroy the Empire, leaving nothing but ruins to this day."

"Why did God do that?"

"I told you—because it was wicked and corrupt, and merciless," said Ashrof. "And now you come along with your dream about Bell Mountain. I find it very troubling!"

He had to explain to Jack that a bell was like a great bronze cup that, when struck, could be heard for miles around. "Just the same as if you clanked a tin cup with your knife, only thousands of times greater. There are bells in Obann City, which they ring for special occasions—when the oligarchs vote to go to war or the First Prester dies.

"Well, if someone rang a great bell from the top of Bell Mountain, it might well seem that the mountain itself was singing. And the other mountains all around would catch the sound and magnify it so that it filled the whole valley. That'd be a rather terrifying sound, especially if you'd never heard the like of it before. I think it'd be just like the sound you hear in your dream."

"But why should I dream that!" Jack cried.

"I don't know, my boy. I burn'd well don't know." Ashrof suddenly shook his head, like a dog shaking off water, and

hugged himself. “Stinking cold last night, though, eh? I find this sun today doesn’t quite warm me as it should.

“Come back again tomorrow, Bucket. I really must have time to think on this. And pray.”