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Learning About Giants

by Ruth Shannon Odor

illustrated by Lois Axeman



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CHILDRENS PRESS, CHICAGO



The earth shakes, windows rattle, people gasp! A giant has just strolled into town!

What should you do? Wave a "good morning"? borrow a slingshot? or head for the hills?



That depends on the giant. For giants come in many varieties. Good ones and bad ones (some very bad ones!). Kind ones and cruel ones (some man-eating ones!). Smart ones and stupid ones (mostly stupid ones!). But all of them are giants—and that means BIG!



Because giants are so big, they are usually clumsy-looking. Often their arms reach below their knees. They trudge and slouch and have potbellies.

And some giants are hairy. In northern countries, thick tufts of hair grow in their ears to keep out cold air (and birds!).

Most giants are stupid. Because of this, they often have been tricked by small children.



Unfortunately, giants do have a good sense of smell. Tales have been told about giants who stomp about sniffing the air for the smell of a human being: "Fee-fi-fo-fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman."

For some giants, as you know, eat PEOPLE!



But don't worry. This kind of giant isn't real! *Most* giants never were real. Then where did they come from?

Long ago, people needed to be strong to stay alive. Big, strong people were important people. They helped protect their friends. Their friends bragged.

Stories about big people grew bigger and bigger. Soon the big people became "giants."





People invented giants for another reason, too. They used giants to explain things they couldn't understand.

"Must be GIANTS," they said, when an earthquake shook the ground. "Must be an angry giant stamping his feet."



And when they heard thunder, people said, "Sounds like a giant laughing."

Fog or mist was (of course!) smoke from a giant's pipe.



Valleys, said storytellers, came from giants walking around in soft earth. Lakes were giants' footprints filled with water. Large mounds of earth were said to be giants' graves. And large, fossilized bones, people thought, must surely be giants' bones. (No one knew about dinosaurs yet.)

Although most giants were made up by people, not all of them were. Some giants were real. The real ones were—and are—simply very tall people.

The Bible tells about giants of this kind. Goliath was a Bible giant. And so was King Og of Bashan.

King Og's bed was more than thirteen-feet long and six-feet wide. Now that's a king-sized bed!





There are some really tall people around today, too. The Watusi who live in central Africa are about seven feet tall. Standing beside you or me, a Watusi would be a giant.

And every so often, someone's pituitary gland (the gland in the body that controls bone growth) works too hard. He grows very tall.

So there are some real "giants."



GIANTS GONE BY

The Bible tells about one of the most famous “giants.”

GOLIATH

was over nine-feet tall!

The Philistines and the Israelites were at war. The Philistine soldiers were on one hill and the Israelite soldiers on another.

One day, a soldier named Goliath came out of the Philistine camp. He wore a bronze coat of armor that weighed about 125 pounds!

Goliath shouted, “Send one of your men to fight me. If I kill him, we win. If he kills me, you win.”

The Israelites were terrified. No one was brave enough to fight such a man. Goliath’s spear alone weighed 15 pounds!

Then a shepherd boy named David came to the Israelite camp to visit his brothers. David heard Goliath’s challenge. “I will go and fight Goliath,” David said.

“But you are only a boy!” said Israel’s king.

“I have been a shepherd,” said David. “And I have fought lions and bears. The same God who kept me safe from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will keep me safe from this Philistine.”

“Go, then,” said the king, “and God be with you.”

David picked up five smooth stones and put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag. Carrying his sling, he went to meet the giant.

When Goliath saw that David was only a boy, he was angry. "Come here, boy," he shouted. "I will take care of you!"

"You come with a sword and a spear," said David. "But I come in the name of God. Today the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel."

Quickly David put a stone in his sling and slung it at the giant. The stone struck Goliath in the forehead and he fell to the ground—dead!

When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they ran. The Israelites chased them and defeated them.



Most of the giants we know about come straight out of stories. The Norse people told many stories about gods and about giants. In their stories, gods and giants were always fighting and killing each other. But one giant named

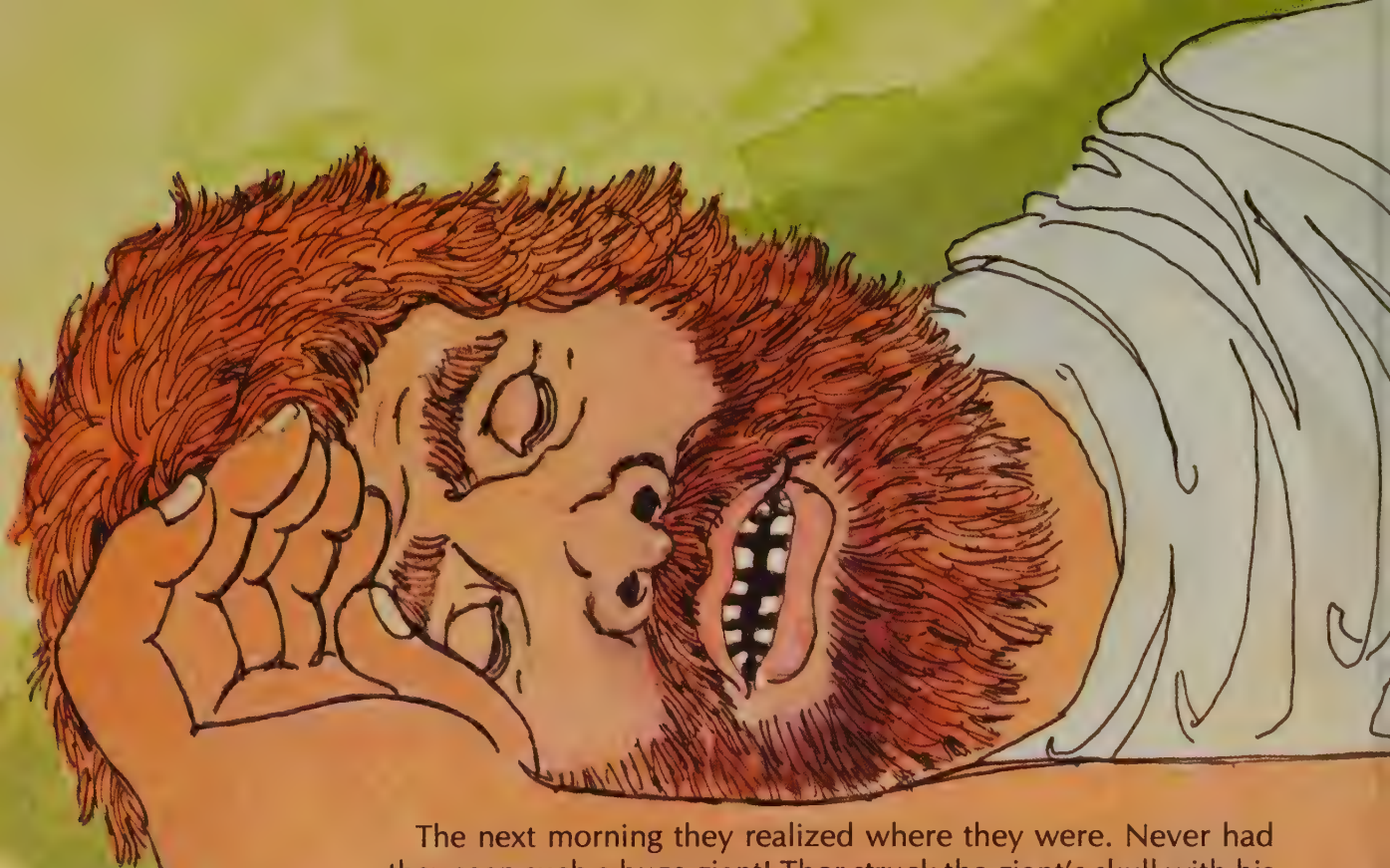
SKRYMIR

was too big for the gods to kill!

Once Thor, the god of thunder, and his friends decided to visit the castle of a giant. Late at night, they came to a great hall. It had five long rooms and a large entrance along one side. What they did not know was that it was not a hall at all. It was the glove of the giant Skrymir!

During the night Thor and his friends were awakened by what they thought was an earthquake. Actually, it was the giant snoring.





The next morning they realized where they were. Never had they seen such a huge giant! Thor struck the giant's skull with his hammer once, twice, three times. But the giant did not even wake up! So Thor and his men went home.

Sometimes it's best to let sleeping giants lie!



Homer once wrote a story-poem about a man called Odysseus (Ō-dīs' ē-ŭs). In the poem, Odysseus met a Cyclopes giant named

POLYPHEMUS.

(Pol-y-phē' mus)

Odysseus' ship was blown off course to a land of giants. So Odysseus and his men went ashore to explore. Soon they found a huge cave. It was empty except for baskets filled with cheese and pails filled with milk.

Suddenly they heard someone coming. It was a giant! Tall, huge, fierce! With only one eye—right in the middle of his forehead!

Odysseus and his men ran and hid. The giant drove his sheep and goats into the cave. Then he put a huge stone in front of the cave door. Odysseus and his men were trapped!





After the giant got a fire burning, he saw the men. The giant picked up two of the men and ate them! Then he stretched out beside the fire and went to sleep.

When morning came, the giant ate two more men! Then he drove his flock outside and replaced the stone. Trapped again!

But while he was gone, Odysseus worked out an escape plan. When the giant returned, Odysseus tried to make friends with him.

"What is your name?" the giant asked.

"No-man is my name," answered Odysseus.



At last the giant went to sleep. Then Odysseus and his men took a sharpened piece of wood and pierced the giant's eye.

The giant screamed. And the men hid! Other giants heard the screaming and came to the cave.

"What is the matter, Polyphemos?" they called.

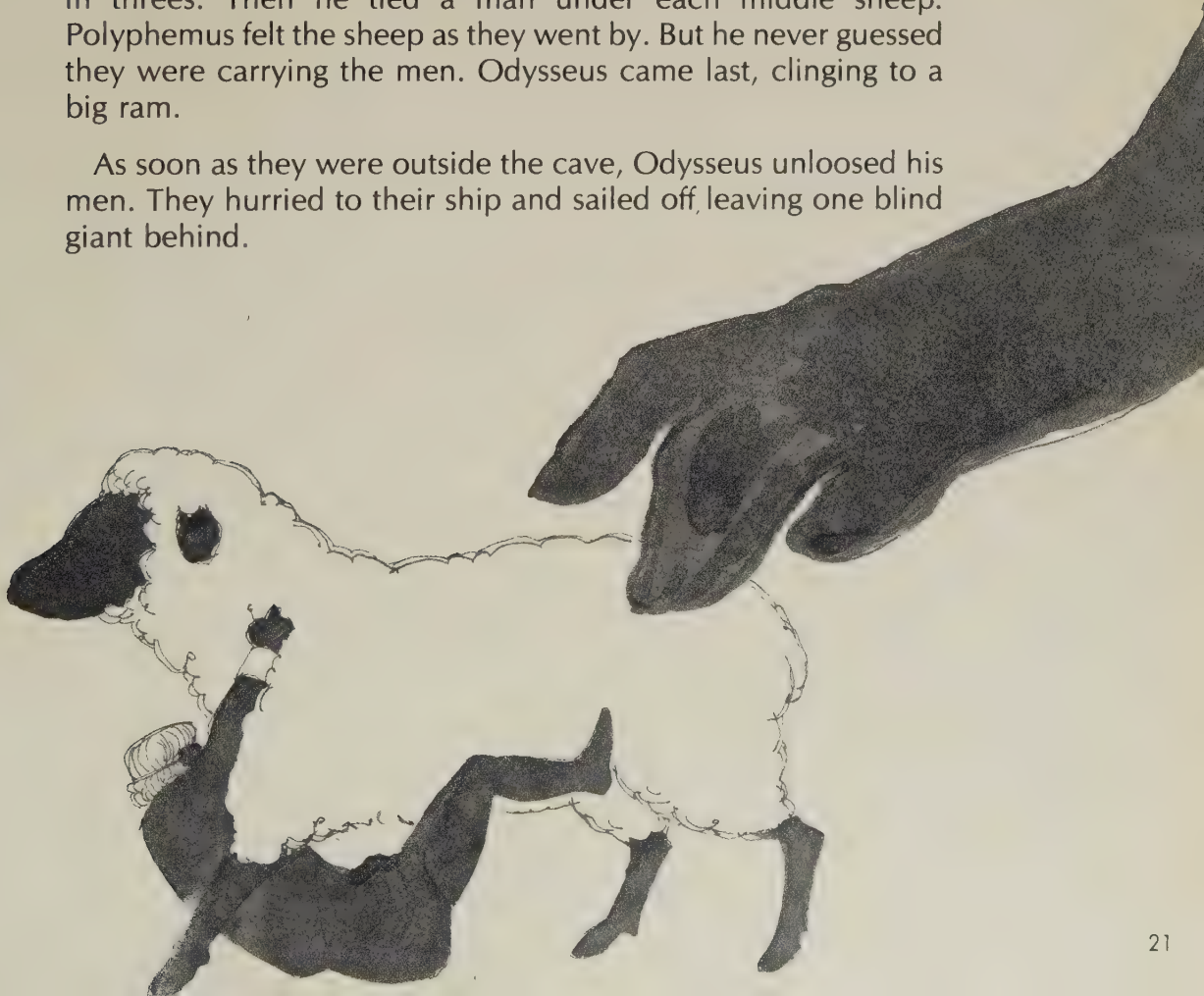
"No-man is killing me!" he cried.

"Well, if no man is killing you, there is nothing we can do, Polyphemos," they said and went away.

Polyphemos, now blind, rolled the stone from the cave door. But he sat by the door and held out his hands, ready to catch the men if they ran out.

Odysseus was ready for that, too. He roped the sheep together in threes. Then he tied a man under each middle sheep. Polyphemos felt the sheep as they went by. But he never guessed they were carrying the men. Odysseus came last, clinging to a big ram.

As soon as they were outside the cave, Odysseus unloosed his men. They hurried to their ship and sailed off, leaving one blind giant behind.



Never was there such a collection of mean, man-eating giants as in the stories about

JACK THE GIANT KILLER.

And never was there a hero who killed as many giants as Jack did.

Jack lived in Cornwall, England, during the time of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. This story is about the first giant Jack met.

Cormoran was a monstrous giant—eighteen-feet tall and three yards around the middle! Cormoran was quite a cattle rustler. He could pick up half a dozen oxen and dozens of sheep and hogs at one time!

One dark night, Jack went to visit Cormoran. He dug a deep pit right in front of Cormoran's cave and covered it with sticks, straw, and earth. Then he blew on his horn so loudly that the giant awoke and came rushing out.

"You! You disturbed my sleep!" shouted the giant. "I'll boil you for my breakfast!"

As the giant stepped forward, he fell into the pit. Jack struck the giant on the head with his axe. And that was the end of Cormoran.



Because of his brave deed, Jack was called Jack the Giant Killer. The people gave him a gold belt embroidered with these words:

“This is the valiant Cornish man
who killed the giant Cormoran.”

Not all giants were mean monsters. Stories are told of one nice giant who lived in England.

THE GIANT OF GRABBIST

This giant lived near the town of Grabbist. The townspeople were not at all afraid of him. In fact, they liked him very much. He often helped them out of bad spots.

Once, while the giant was out fishing, a terrible storm came up. The giant saw that a fishing boat was caught in the storm. So he picked up the fishing boat—crew and all—and set the boat down gently in the harbor.

Sometimes, people said, the giant would wash his feet in the water. When he would wave to his friends on the shore, all the washing on the clotheslines would flap enough to dry!

How's that for a clothes dryer?



STORYBOOK GIANTS

Most of the stories about giants are so old that we don't know who made them up. But not this story. Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels* in the 1700's. The book tells of the adventures of Gulliver. He traveled to make-believe countries. One of the countries was called

BROBDINGNAG.

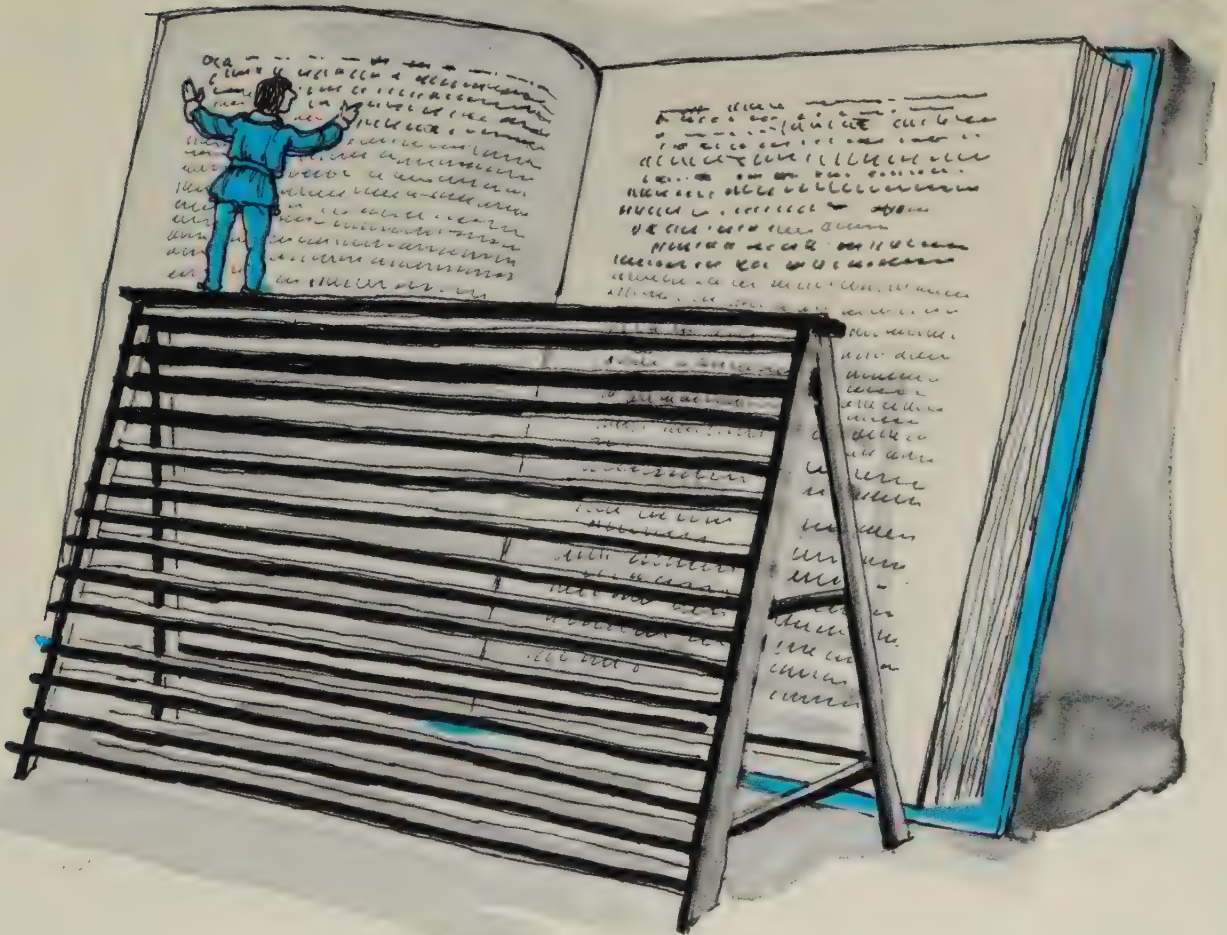
(Brob' ding-nag)

Gulliver climbed a hill to get a view of Brobdingnag. It looked like any other land, except the grass was 20-feet high! Hmmm. . . .

Suddenly, Gulliver felt himself being lifted off the ground. A giant had picked him up! The giant gave Gulliver to his master, a farmer. The farmer had never seen a man as small as Gulliver!

And Gulliver had not seen many men as big as that farmer! Glumdalclitch, the farmer's daughter, took care of Gulliver. Her doll's bed soon became Gulliver's!

After awhile, Gulliver came to like living in Brobdingnag. He learned to speak the giants' language. And he even found a way to read their books.



But Gulliver didn't really belong there. So when he was finally rescued, Gulliver didn't mind leaving the giants of Brobdingnag.

You've heard about this big guy. Remember the giant in

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK?

Once upon a time, a poor widow had a son named Jack. She sent Jack to the market to sell their cow. Instead, Jack traded the cow for some strange beans. That was not what his mother had in mind! Angrily, she threw the beans out the window.

That night the beans grew into a beanstalk that reached the sky. Jack climbed to the top of the beanstalk. There, he followed a road to a big house. On the doorstep stood a tall woman. Jack asked her for something to eat.

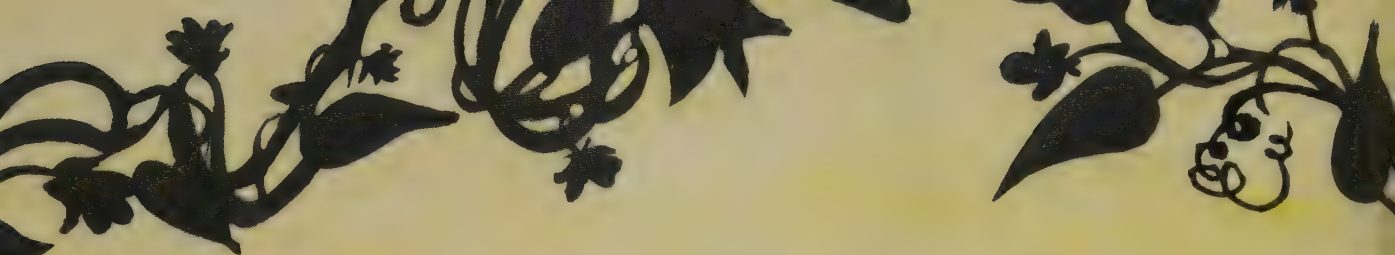
The woman told Jack to leave. She said her husband was a giant and his favorite food was broiled boys on toast!

But Jack was too hungry to care. So the tall woman took him into the kitchen and gave him some bread and cheese and milk.

Then THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! The house began to tremble. The bloodthirsty giant was returning home! Quickly the tall woman hid Jack in the oven.



"Fee-fi-fo-fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman," shouted the giant. "Be he alive, or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread."



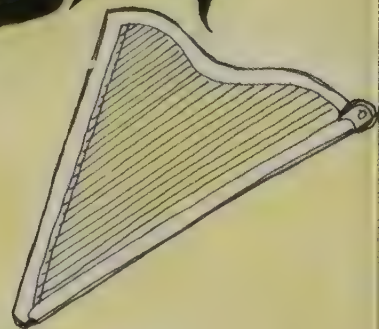
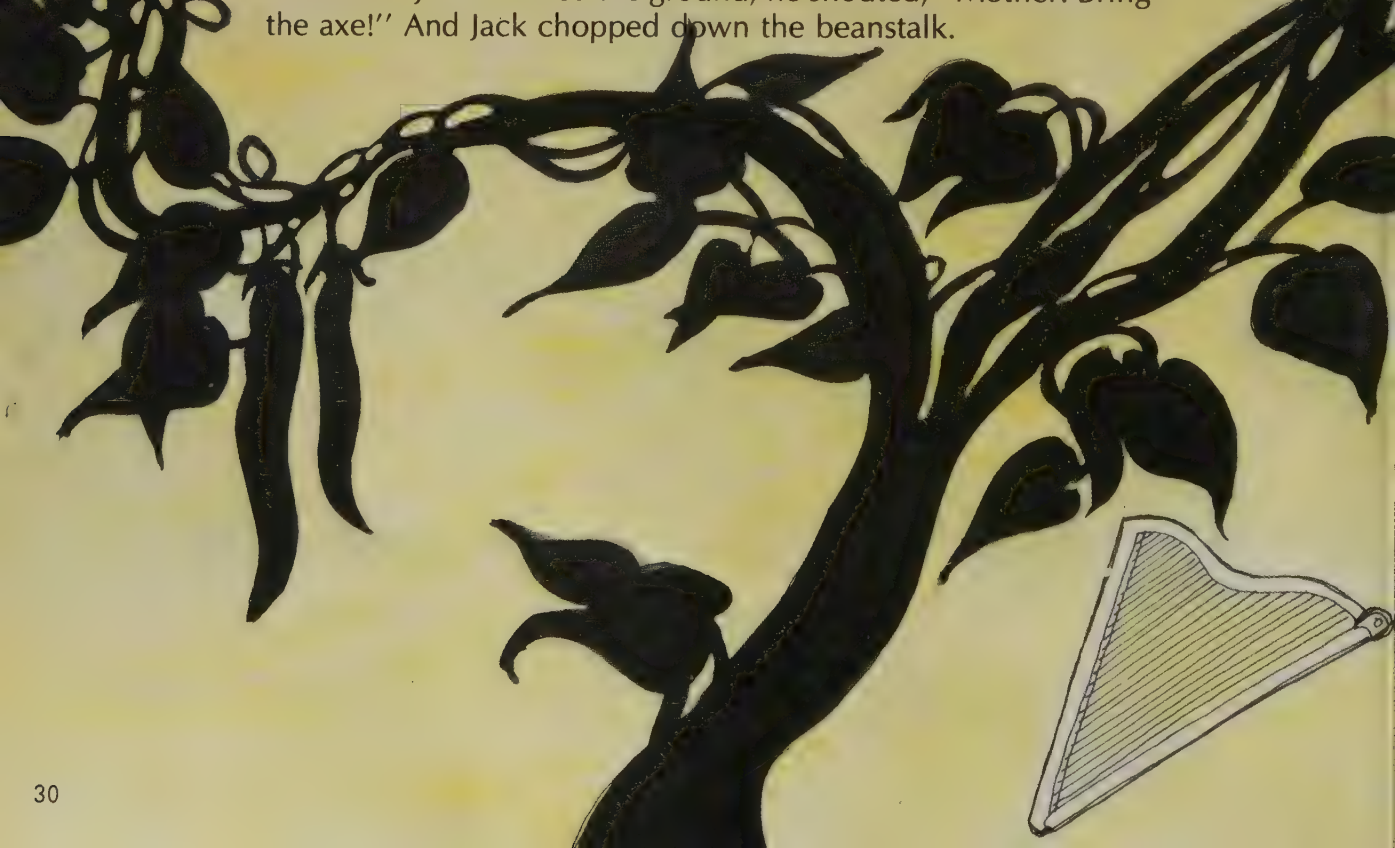
"Nonsense," said his wife. "You just smell the scraps of the little boy you ate yesterday."

So the giant ate his breakfast, sat down to count his gold, and fell asleep. Jack crept out of the oven, tiptoed past the giant, grabbed a bag of gold, and ran to the beanstalk. He threw the bag of gold to the ground and climbed down.

For some time Jack and his mother lived on the bag of gold. But when all of it was gone, Jack decided to climb the beanstalk again. When he returned he brought a hen that laid golden eggs.

A third time Jack climbed the beanstalk. This time he grabbed a golden harp. But the harp cried out, "Master! Master!"

The giant woke up and chased Jack right down the beanstalk. As soon as Jack reached the ground, he shouted, "Mother! Bring the axe!" And Jack chopped down the beanstalk.





The beanstalk crashed to the ground. So did the giant!

Jack and his mother became rich. (The harp and the hen helped a little!) Jack married a princess. And they lived happily ever after.

Another storybook giant was created by Oscar Wilde in his story,

THE SELFISH GIANT.

Once a Giant had a beautiful garden. There were singing birds, beautiful flowers, and twelve peach trees. The trees blossomed in the spring and bore fruit in the fall. Every afternoon, on their way home from school, children stopped to play in the Giant's garden.





Now the Giant was not at home. He had been away for seven years. But one day he came back. "What are you doing here?" he boomed at the children. "This is my garden! Nobody can play in it but me."

So all the children left the garden. The giant built a high wall all around it and put up a "No Trespassing" sign.

Now the children had no place to play.

Spring came. Blossoms and birds and flowers were everywhere—but not in the Selfish Giant's garden! There it was still Winter. Snow covered the grass, the cold North Wind blew, and icy hail fell.

The Selfish Giant looked out of his window and wondered why the Spring did not come. Summer did not come. Even Autumn did not come.



Then one morning the Selfish Giant awoke to hear a bird singing. He looked out his window. Spring had come to his garden! The children had found a hole in the wall and crawled into the garden. They were sitting in the branches of the trees. Flowers bloomed. Birds sang!

Except in one corner of the garden. One tree was still covered with frost and snow. Beneath it was a little boy, crying. He was so small that he could not reach the branches and climb up into the tree.



"How selfish I have been," said the Giant. "Now I know why the Spring would not come."

The Giant went out into the garden. When the children saw him, they ran away, and Winter came back to the garden.

But the little boy did not run away, for he did not see the Giant. Gently, the Giant helped him up into the tree. And the tree broke into beautiful blossoms! The little boy hugged the Giant. The children came running back, and with them, came the Spring.

The years went by and the Giant grew old and feeble. But he never saw his first little friend again.

Then one winter morning, the Giant looked out at his snow-covered garden. In the farthest corner was a tree covered with white blossoms. Gold and silver fruit hung from its branches. And beneath it stood the same little boy.

Joyfully, the Giant ran to the boy. Then he saw nailprints on the boy's hands and feet!

"Who hurt you?" he asked. "Who are you?"

The child smiled and said, "You let me play in your garden. Today you will come with me to my garden. It is called Paradise."

That afternoon when the children came, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, covered with its white blossoms.



People still write stories about giants today. William Dana Street made up a story about

GIANT GRUMMER.

Giant Grummer was a very bad giant. Two things made him bad. He hated Christmas. And his favorite food was limburger cheese!

Giant Grummer even lived in a castle made of limburger cheese. Have you ever smelled limburger cheese? It smells. . . A-W-F-U-L!





One year, Giant Grummer said he was going to steal the toys that Santa Claus left for the children. He said he was going to reach down every chimney, grab the stockings, take all the presents to his castle, and stamp on them! He was a very bad giant!

The people in the village did not know how to stop the giant. They couldn't stand to go near his limburger castle!

But one little boy had a plan. His name was Topsey Turvey. Topsey Turvey could turn his nose upside down. Then things smelled just the opposite of what they really did. Topsey Turvey called up Santa Claus and told him about the plan.

Soon Giant Grummer got a letter from Santa Claus. It told him to hang up his stocking on Christmas Eve.

Why not? thought the giant. He'd check his own stocking before going to the village to steal presents.

So, on Christmas Eve, the giant hung up a great big stocking.

Meanwhile, Topsey Turvey met Santa Claus outside the castle. He turned Santa's nose—and the noses of the reindeer—upside down. That made limburger cheese smell like cookies and gingerbread! (And that's much better than limburger cheese.)

Then Santa crept into the castle. Quietly, he filled the giant's stocking. He put in a real car, a huge horn, and candy and cookies. Last of all, Santa dropped in the biggest, strongest, worst-smelling limburger cheeses in the whole world!

The next morning Giant Grummer spied the cheese. He didn't even empty out the rest of his stocking! He just sat down and ate and ate and ate. Soon he was so full that he fell fast asleep. Instead of stealing toys, he slept all through Christmas Day!



TALL TALES

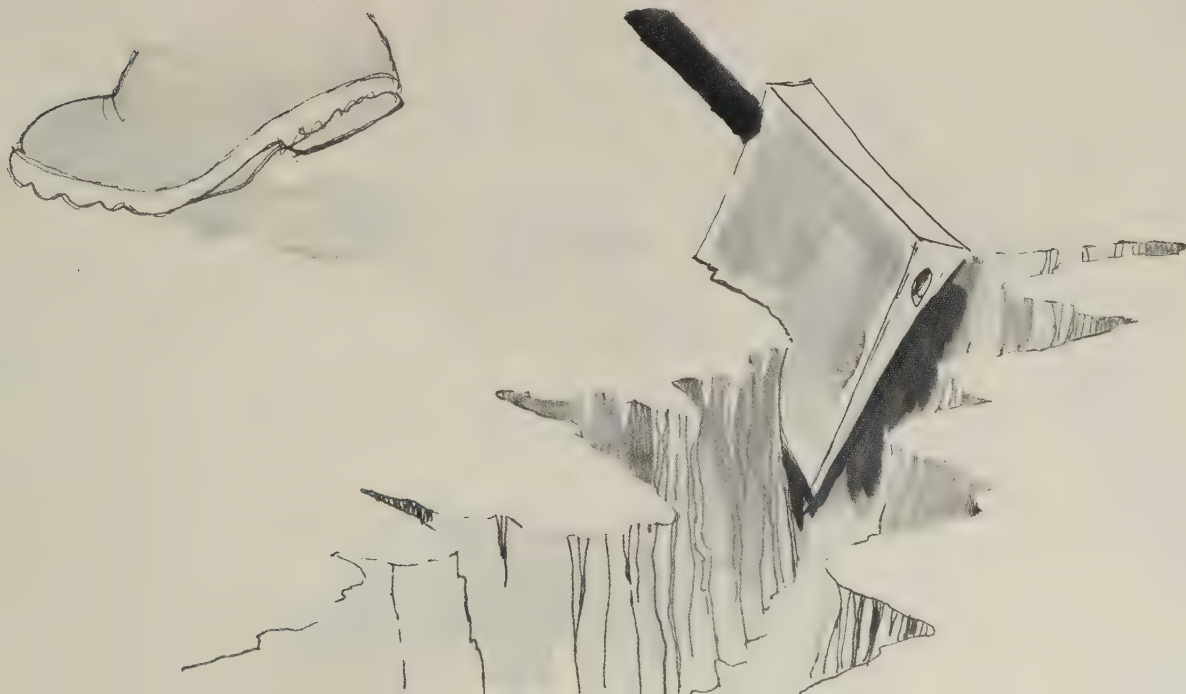
About 100 years ago, men who worked in the lumber camps of North America began telling tall tales about a lumberjack hero. They named him

PAUL BUNYAN.

Paul Bunyan was taller than the trees of the forest, the lumberjacks said. Why, he could break the tallest pine tree in two with his bare hands. Chopping down a whole forest was only a day's work for Paul.

Paul Bunyan invented logging, they said. His axe was as wide as a barn door. The handle was an oak tree. And it was so heavy that it took six men to lift it.

One story tells about Paul traveling west. He dragged his axe instead of carrying it on his shoulder, and he left behind a big ditch. Today they call it the Grand Canyon.





During the Winter of the Blue Snow, Paul found a baby ox in a snowdrift. He took him home and decided to keep him for a pet. He named his ox Babe.

The cold winter turned Babe blue, and he stayed blue! But he grew taller and bigger and stronger than any other ox. When he was full-grown, he was almost as big as Paul. He measured 42 axe handles between the eyes. (That's a big head!)



The tales of Paul Bunyan and Babe grew taller and taller. As the men sat in the logging camps in the evenings, each storyteller tried to outdo the other.

When there was a difficult job to do, or when everything was going wrong, the men enjoyed the stories of Paul and his blue ox even more. The stories seemed to give them courage to face their problems. Besides, the stories were fun to tell!

The cowboys were not far behind the lumberjacks. They made up their own giant hero.

PECOS BILL

was named after the Pecos River. And a giant he was!

People thought Pecos Bill was the first cowboy. They said he invented the six-shooter and held the very first rodeo. Pecos Bill rode bucking broncos that no other cowboy dared ride.

And he rode something rougher than the wildest bronc. One day Pecos Bill came home after a tornado had picked up his house, his barn, and his trees. That tornado had even picked up the Pecos River! Bill's wife, Slue-Foot Sue, told him the tornado was still sweeping across the West.

Well, Pecos Bill chased that tornado. And he caught up with it, even though it was going 1,002 miles an hour. He lassoed it, but it pulled him up off the ground. So Bill climbed up the lasso and rode the tornado as if it were a bucking bronco.

The tornado whipped this way and that, but it couldn't get Pecos Bill off its back. Bill just wouldn't give up. Finally the tornado did.

Two different tales are told about how Pecos Bill died. Some say that he drank fish hooks, barbed wire, and strychnine (poison). That *would* cause indigestion! Others say he died when a city dude wearing cowboy clothes and a ten-gallon hat came to town. They say Pecos Bill died laughing!



People don't make up stories about giants as they once did. Maybe that's because we don't need giants to protect us any longer. And we don't need giants to explain earthquakes or thunder or fog.

But stories about giants are a part of our lives. They tell us a lot about the people who made them up and about the times in which those people lived.

And they help us use our own imaginations. Make-believe is fun. When we see a clothesline of wash blowing dry in the wind, it's kind of nice to think that, somewhere, the Giant of Grabbist is waving, "Hello."



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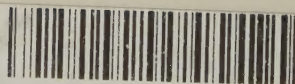
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ISBN 0-516-06534-3