



CHAPTER I

"JILL!" Jack of All Trades heard the loud voice shouting, and paused on the stile, to look round.

It was a bitter December day.

Hedges were topped with snow. The branches of the great tree that stood near the stile were leafless, and glistened with frost. There was bright winter sunshine, but it did not melt the snow that lay thick in the meadows, or the ice on the ditches and ponds.

Jack had been following a winding, seemingly endless Somerset lane, trudging through snow and slush, for miles: and sturdy lad as he was, he was getting tired. He was glad to reach the stile which, as they had told him back at Froude, gave on the footpath to Cheed: a short cut across Farmer Huggett's meadows that saved a mile on the road. Jack was anxious to get to Cheed, where a job and a dinner awaited him. But he paused, and looked round, as the loud voice shouted in the meadow he was about to enter.

"Jill! Where are you, Jill?"

He glimpsed a big man in gaiters. His red tanned face had a look of mingled anger and anxiety.

He caught sight of Jack the next moment, standing on the stile, with one leg over. He stared at him.

"Here, you!" he called out. "Have you seen a kid wandering in the lane—a little girl?"

"No: I've seen nobody!" answered Jack.

The man in gaiters gave an angry snort, and turned away. Apparently he was in search of a little girl named Jill who had wandered. Jack could understand that he was anxious, for a child might very easily have tumbled into one of the deep snow-drifts by the hedges. Indeed, tired as he was getting, and more than ready for that dinner at Cheed, he would willingly have offered his services to help in the search. But the farmer, without waiting for another word from him, tramped away by the hedge.

Jack stepped over the stile into the meadow, to go on his way. The sight of the village spire in the far distance was more than welcome to his eyes. He trudged on cheerily: but he had not taken a dozen steps, when there was a shout behind.

"Here, you! Stop!"

Jack turned round.

The big man in gaiters was striding towards him. He had had a stick under his arm. That stick had now slid down into his hand. And the look on his rugged red face indicated that he was thinking of a use for it.

Jack eyed him warily, as he came striding up, Mr. Huggett did not look a good-tempered man: and perhaps his anxiety for the missing Jill had given an edge to his temper. Jack liked neither his look, nor the look of the stick in his hand.

"Where are you going?" demanded Mr. Huggett.

"Cheed!" answered Jack briefly.

"You're not going across my land!"

"It's a footpath—"

"It's not a public footpath, and I don't allow tramps on my land. I've missed too many things from my sheds to want tramps about. Get back over that stile, and sharp."

Jack's face flushed crimson.

"I'm not a tramp!" he exclaimed, indignantly.

"Ain't you? You look it!" sneered Mr. Huggett. "Get off my land! I'll have no more thieving fingers round here."

"If you think I'd touch anything in your sheds—"

"I don't think—I know!" interrupted the farmer. "Are you getting back over that stile, or waiting for a lick from this stick?"

"I'm going across to Cheed—Oh!" gasped Jack, as Mr. Huggett, losing patience, strode nearer, and lashed out with the stick, across his shoulders.

"Now get going, you young rascal! Here, I'll see you safe off my land—Oh!"

It was Mr. Huggett's turn to ejaculate "Oh!" as he grasped the boy by the collar. Much to his surprise, Jack gave grasp for grasp, hooked his gaitered leg, and spun him over. The big man was utterly taken by surprise. He went over with a crash, landing on his back in snowy grass.

"Oh!" he spluttered. "Oh!"

Jack's eyes flashed down at him.

"Now keep your stick to yourself!" he snapped.

"Oh! By hokey!" gurgled Mr. Huggett. He dragged himself to his feet, his eyes blazing. "You just wait a second—"

Jack of All Trades did not wait a second. He had floored Mr. Huggett, taking him by surprise. But he would have been an infant in the hands of the brawny farmer, once Mr. Huggett was on his feet—without counting the stick! He did not wait a split second for the farmer to get into action. He ran back to the stile: and he ran hard, hoping to jump it before the farmer could get near enough to handle the stick on him.

Fast behind him came tramping feet.

That fall seemed to have hurt Mr. Huggett a little. Certainly it had given the final touch to a temper already irate. He chased after the running boy, his long legs covering the ground at a great rate, and Jack of All Trades could hear his heavy breathing close behind.

Jack reached the stile just as the farmer reached him. But he did not jump it, as he had first thought of doing. The farmer could have run him down in the lane quite easily. The boy leaped on the top bar of the stile, and caught at a branch overhead. He swung himself into the air, just as the stick lashed out, and it barely missed as he swung up into the great tree.

"Why, you young limb!" gasped Mr. Huggett.

He clambered on the stile, much less nimbly than Jack, and steadying himself with one hand against the tree-trunk, lashed out with the stick in the other, at the boy in the branches.

But Jack of All Trades did not linger on a lower branch. He clambered from branch to branch, high in the tree, far out of the reach of Mr. Huggett and his stick. Sitting astride of a high branch, holding on to another, he looked down at the farmer—and laughed. The baffled expression on Mr. Huggett's face was quite entertaining. He glared up at Jack, and brandished the stick, and roared:

"Come down out of that, you young rogue!"

"Not likely, you old rogue!" retorted Jack.

"I'll limb you, when I get my hands on you!"

"Come up after me!" suggested Jack.

Mr. Huggett glared up. But he did not attempt to clamber up. Tree-climbing was not in his line. And frosty branches that easily bore the boy's light weight, would certainly have cracked and snapped under Mr. Huggett's bulk. Jack of All Trades was out of his reach: and Mr. Huggett had to leave him out of reach.

"Will you come down?" he roared.

"Hardly!"

"I'll thrash you—"

"You won't!" said Jack, laughing. "I'll stay here as long as you stay there, I'll keep up this game as long as you do."

Mr. Huggett breathed wrath.

"You wait till I get my hands on you, you young tramp!" he said. "I'll keep an eye open for you, and when you come down—well, you just wait!"

With that, the farmer put the stick under his arm, and moved away from the stile. Jack heard his voice again, calling "Jill!" Apparently he was in search of Jill again. But he did not move very far away: and Jack of All Trades realized that his best guess, for the present, was to stay where he was, perched in high branches: with a wide view of fields and lanes and meadows, snowy hedges and frozen ponds, if that had been any consolation.

CHAPTER II

"OH!" exclaimed Jack of All Trades.

He gave so sudden a start, that he almost lost his hold. Hanging on to a high branch, he stared across the frosty meadow. It was a wide, extensive meadow, bounded on the further side by a thick line of willows. From the ground, it was impossible to see into the next field: the willows barred the view. But from a high tree, there was a clear view over the tops of the low willows, and the adjoining field was spread out clearly before Jack's eyes. And in that field something had suddenly riveted his attention.

A glistening patch, shining back the sun, was the surface of a frozen pond. Something red showed on the edge of the pond. Staring at it Jack made out the figure of a small girl, clad in warm woollies, with a red scarf tied round her neck. In the distance, he might not have noticed her at all, but for the red scarf. But that spot of bright colour leaped to the eye in the sunshine. Looking at her, a tiny figure in the distance, he wondered whether this might be the "Jill" of whom the angry Mr. Huggett was in search. If so, the child evidently had wandered through some gap in the willows into the next field, far beyond sound of the farmer's calling voice, out of sight and out of hearing. While Mr. Huggett searched and called in one field, the child was roaming on the edge of the frozen pond in the next.

Jack could not help smiling. The footpath he had wanted to follow ran on through the next field, close by the pond: and had the disgruntled Mr. Huggett permitted him to follow it, he would have found Jill there—if that was Jill, as he did not doubt—and could and would have called back the news to the anxious father. Now, as he watched the red scarf, he was considering whether to drop from the tree, and seek Mr. Huggett with the information that the little girl was in the next field: but that required thinking out. Mr. Huggett might begin with the stick without waiting for him to speak: nor could he be quite certain

that the little girl in the next field was Jill. He looked round, to ascertain whether the big man in gaiters was within shouting distance. He had a glimpse of Mr. Huggett's hat, far away along a hedge, where he was peering into a snow-drift. He was too far off for a calling voice.

Jack looked round again, at the spot of red in the next field. The smile lingered on his face. Mr. Huggett was searching and searching, and a word from the boy in the tree would have put him wise. Only his own bad temper and big stick kept him from learning what he wanted to know.

But suddenly the smile was wiped from Jack's face. He uttered a startled exclamation, his attention riveted on the tiny figure by the distant pond. The child was stepping out on the ice. Even at the distance, Jack could see that there were long cracks in the ice on the pond, where the water welled up. It was not thick ice: it was a sheet of thin ice that covered the pond, unsafe for any foot to venture upon: and the child, utterly unaware of danger, was walking across towards the further side.

"Oh!" panted Jack.

His ruddy, sunburnt face paled, as he stared, his heart jolting. At any instant, the ice might crack under those little feet, and the child disappear from sight. And even as he stared, in horror at what he saw, he discerned a long crack breaking in the ice just behind the little girl. He could hear no sound, at the distance: but evidently the child heard the cracking of the ice, she turned round and looked—and then stood still, staring. The danger she was in had suddenly dawned on her mind, and she stood motionless, evidently too frightened to move. It was fortunate, perhaps, that she did so, for another step might have caused another crack, and she might have been engulfed under the boy's horrified eyes.

Only for one moment did Jack stare. Then he was slithering madly down the tree. To cut across the meadow, to run as he had never run before, and reach the child in the next field before she went through the ice, was the only thought in the mind of Jack of All Trades. He forgot Mr. Huggett—he forgot everything but that little figure frozen with terror on the cracking ice. The branches swayed and rustled, as he scrambled from one to another. He dropped panting to the ground, and started at a run on the footpath.

But if he had forgotten Mr. Huggett, Mr. Huggett had not forgotten him. There was a roar from a distance.

"You young limb! By gum! Stop! Stop! You hear me! Stop!"

Jack was not likely to stop. He tore on, and the angry man roared after him.

"Crossing my land, by gum! You young rascal, running across my land under my own eyes! Stop! I—I—I'll—I!"

Words seemed to fail Mr. Huggett. Leaving the snow-drift under the hedge into which he had been peering, he started to run in pursuit. Utterly unaware of what was happening in the next field, beyond the screening willows, the

angry farmer could only suppose that the boy was following the footpath to get to Cheed, in cool defiance of him, his orders, and his big stick. His rugged face was red with wrath as he charged in pursuit, the stick gripped in his hand. And he covered the ground fast.

But Jack had a good start: and he was running like the wind. The snowy grass seemed to whiz under his feet. Heedless, hardly conscious, of the angry man in his rear, charging after him like a bull, he tore onward. He could see nothing of the child in the red scarf now—now that he was on the ground, the willows blocked the view. He could only hope and pray that she would be still above the ice when he reached the pond.

He reached the willows, and tore through a gap into the next field—no doubt the way the child had wandered. He vanished from the eyes of the angry man charging on behind.

He burst into the next field. A spot of red met his eyes as he cleared the willows, and he panted with relief. The child was still on the ice—standing as



Jack struggled back to the bank.

he had seen her from the tree-top. But the thin ice was cracking all round her, and water washed over her little shoes. It was a matter of moments—and Jack panted on desperately towards the pond.

Crac-c-c-ck!

The ice was going.

“Oh!” Jack almost sobbed for breath, as he panted on. A few yards more—but madly as he ran, he could not reach the pond in time. The thin ice cracked all round the child, and there was a frightened whimpering shriek, as the little figure went through, and the red scarf disappeared in welling water and fragments of broken ice.

A moment more, and Jack reached the pond.

Splash!

He was in the icy water, swimming. Something touched his hand, and he grasped—it was the red scarf. A little unconscious face, with drenched hair, came up—and remained up. Keeping that little face above the water Jack of All Trades struggled back to the bank, and dragged himself from the pond, with the child in his arms, just as Mr. Huggett, brandishing his big stick, came charging through the gap in the willows.

CHAPTER III

“JILL!”
Mr. Huggett came to a sudden halt. The stick dropped from his hand. His eyes bulged from his rugged face, at the drenched and dripping boy on the pond's edge, with the unconscious child in his arms.

“Jill!” he gasped.

Jack panted for breath.

“She's all right! She was only a second in the water! I saw her from the tree-top—that was why—”

“Jill!”

Mr. Huggett caught the child from Jack's arms. He turned to stride away towards the farm-house in the distance. Jack began to wring the water out of his drenched clothes. He was soaked from head to foot, and almost freezing with the cold. He realized that he was safe from Mr. Huggett's big stick: but he was in sad case to go on his way. But the farmer looked back over his shoulder. His face was not angry—there was no sign of bad temper about Mr. Huggett now.

“Here, boy!”

Jack looked at him.

“May I go by the footpath now—?” he began.

Mr. Huggett interrupted him.

"You young fool! You're drenched! Come with me, and dry your clothes."

"Oh!"

"And sharp!"

"Oh! all right."

Mr. Huggett strode away with long strides. Jack had to trot to keep pace. And never had he been so glad to feel the warmth of a fire, as he was when he reached the Huggett farm-house.

JACK did take that forbidden footpath after all. But it was later in the day, warm and dry, with a good dinner inside him, a parting hand-shake from Mr. Huggett, a parting kiss from the farmer's wife, and a wave of the hand and a smile from little Jill.

THE END