Nursery Rhymes

With pictures by
Claud Lovat Fraser



Robert Lacey Ben Coppin

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Edited by Robert Lacey

Illustrations restored by Ben Coppin

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Original illustrations by Claud Lovat Fraser
Restored and updated by Ben Coppin

Proportions of royalties from the sales of this book have been dedicated to the Library of the Royal Academy of Arts in memory of Claud Lovat Fraser – and to Storybook Dads and Storybook Mums who enable imprisoned parents to record bedtime stories on audio or video for their children

Gelatin Silver Print on p.iv of Claud Lovat Fraser by Marion Neilson, 1913
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The Magic of Nursery Rhymes

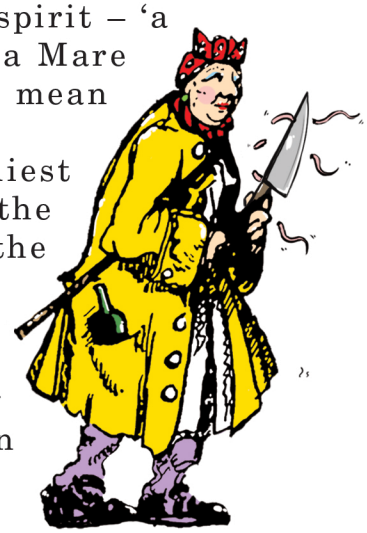


Three kind mice, three kind mice,
See how they run, see how they run!
They all ran after the farmer's wife,
Who cut them some cheese with her carving knife...

Did ever you see such a thing in your life as a nursery rhyme collection that did not contain some elements of sadness and cruelty – and, yes, that cheeky stab of blood-curdling malice which this 're-formed' rhyme of the 1950s sought to eliminate?

Kind mice, not blind mice? Give us a break. A farmer's wife who doles out extra food to foster the household pests? We all know that the real world is tougher than that – and so do the countless generations of children who have recited nursery rhymes over the centuries.

Nursery rhymes are little odes to joy – expressing children's earliest pleasure in the sparky delights of language, learning and living. Their fun, fables and fancy transport the spirit – 'a direct short cut into poetry,' declared Walter de la Mare (1873–1956), the children's author who was no mean poet himself.



In 1853, James Halliwell, one of the earliest anthologists of juvenile literature, described the nursery rhyme as 'the novel and light reading of the infant scholar', explaining how their nonsense is the paradoxical key to the rhymes' serious function. Their fantasies provide the paths by which children can test and explore the developing power of their imaginations, revelling in their own gravity-defying world where cows can jump over



the moon. The adult thinks the little dog 'barks' to see such fun, but the child knows better – that little dog is really 'laughing'.

Nursery rhymes teach history. Their pie men, wigs and sheep-in-the-meadow instruct young people in the details of a way of life that operated long before they were born – as many as a quarter of England's current nursery rhymes could have been known to Shakespeare. Their circular wordplay and wackiness have stood the test of time against all manner of competitors – shrugging off TV jingles in recent decades, and now facing up to the formidable challenges of online imagery. Don't bet against them!

These entertainments for children can sometimes tackle grim adult themes. In 1952, a survey of a hundred traditional rhymes showed 14 that featured stealing and general dishonesty – and 21 deaths by such graphically depicted processes as choking, boiling, starvation and even shrivelling. Not to mention decapitation:

Here comes a candle to light you to bed,
And here comes a chopper to chop off your head!

In the mid-20th century years that sought to recover from the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, well-meaning reformers suggested a need to soften and re-frame traditional nursery rhymes – hence the devising of those three 'kind' mice. Hoping to get peace off to a better start, Geoffrey Hall, a Manchester businessman, financed in 1950 the publication of *Happy Mother Goose – Jolly Versions of Nursery Favourites*, an entire volume of literally re-formed rhymes in which Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard turned out not to be bare. When she went looking for a bone, 'she found plenty to spare' –



And so her nice dog got one!

But it is actually the function of nursery rhymes to reflect the full spectrum of life, packing the punch of cold, hard truth. That egg, for example, who was stupid enough to sit on a wall. Why should Humpty have imagined that he would not have a great fall? And how typical of all those royal courtiers to faff around, seeking to perform

the impossible with a pile of broken eggshells! There is a knowingly sharpened edge to these children's ditties – a stony-eyed stare at the unpredictable world into which young people find themselves stepping. The rhymes are crammed with solid meanings (many of them set out towards the end of this book on pages 89-110) – and it is their essence to be subversive. Their sly fables externalise the way in which young children come to terms with the realities of an often-frightening existence.

But they also give shape to the beauties of that existence. When nominating 'the finest line in English literature', G.K.Chesterton, author of the *Father Brown* stories, had no doubt:



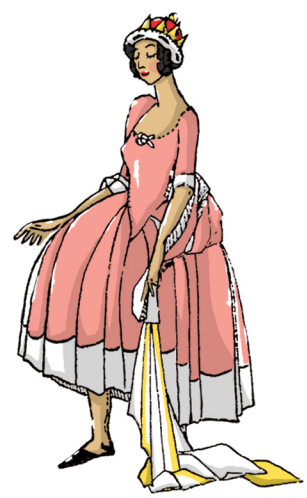
So, welcome to the real world – well, the half-way real world – of nursery rhymes, where infants start the journey of learning about life, testing their impulses to independence against the rival human yearning to connect.

Imagine a child lying in its bed seeking some contact with the crucial and all-providing figure that is looming over it. How to reach out? How to respond to all those signals and messages?

This poses a technical problem – for what are the elements that can develop verbal contact between parent and child? And how can the child learn to shape those sounds that will make a connection? That is why nursery rhymes contain so many sound-based words – all that buzzing and ticking and tocking.

We all have our own favourites. Mine remains:

Lavender's blue, dilly dilly,
Lavender's green.
When I am king, dilly dilly,
You shall be queen.



Oh, the wild ambitions that nursery rhymes can inspire as we set off through life!

Robert Lacey – March 2024



HEY diddle diddle!
The cat and the fiddle!
The cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed
To see such fun,
And the dish ran away
with the spoon.

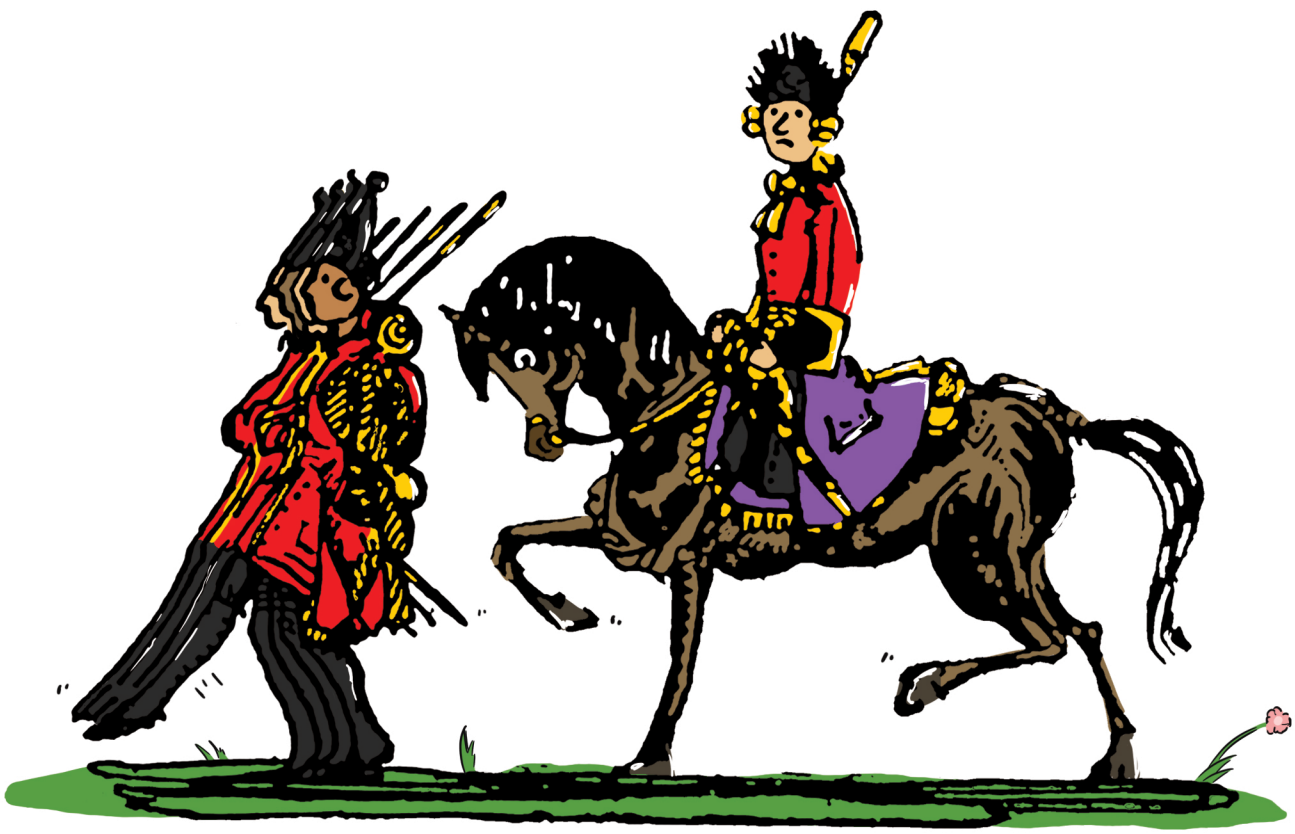




HUMPTY DUMPTY
sat on a wall;
Humpty Dumpty
had a great fall...



All the King's horses,
and all the King's men,
Couldn't put Humpty
together again.



Meanings

Making sense of nonsense . . .



ONE of the joys of nursery rhymes is that they often don't mean anything at all. Or they can mean whatever we want them to! Their delight lies in the snap, crackle and pop of their nonsensical imaginings – with cats who play fiddles and energetic cows who jump over the moon. They often provide our first journeys into the pleasures of rhyme and poetry, our very earliest experiments with words and ideas, no matter how fantastical.

But these fantastical words *did* come from somewhere. Most nursery rhymes were originally invented by adults, who devised the words and meanings themselves – and often with quite dark messages. Cruelty to animals, deadly diseases, taxes, religious and political persecution – all these themes provided the raw material for the rough and often mangey verses that grown-ups have repeated to children over the centuries.

The apparently charming 'Ring-a-ring o' roses', for example, is said to have been inspired by the tragic epidemic that preceded the Great Fire of London of 1666. 'Rosie' was the noxious-smelling rash that infected the skin of bubonic plague sufferers, who tried to conceal the ghastly stench with a fragrant 'pocket full of posies'. In 1665 plague killed an estimated 15% of the capital's population. 'A-tishoo! A-tishoo! We all fall down.' Down DEAD, in other words.

How dark do you want it? The evidence linking 'Ring o' Roses' to the Great Plague is historically absent – and plague is certainly not the reason why this famous nursery rhyme has flourished for centuries, bringing such joy to many a giggling birthday party.

So, read below if you would like to investigate what history tells us about the origins of these weird and fun flights of fancy.

But remember – it is not the history, but the fancy that makes them fun. The drawings that follow are all the original, unaltered illustrations by Claud Lovat Fraser for his *Nursery Rhymes* with pictures published in 1919, along with images from his other works. The dates that accompany each title tell you the year in or around which that particular nursery rhyme (or a rhyme very similar in wording and theme) was first published in printed form – hundreds of years ago in most cases.

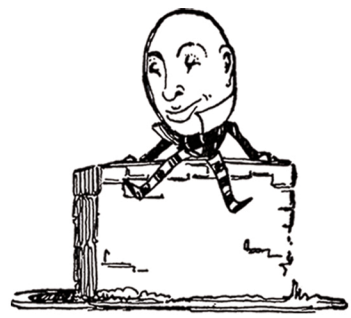


Hey, Diddle Diddle! (p.1) – 1765

One popular but disputed theory suggests that the 'Dish' and the 'Spoon' were nicknames given to the Tudor courtiers who would (a) serve food to the monarch and who (b) tasted the food to make sure that it was not poisoned – how do you fancy that second job? When one eminent 'Dish', the Earl of Hertford, ran away with a beautiful 'Spoon', the Lady Katherine Grey, an enraged Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) had the errant couple locked up in the Tower of London. 'The Cat and the Fiddle' are said to derive from pious Queen Catherine of Aragon ('Cathérine la Fidèle'); Elizabeth I herself, who loved dancing, has been cast as the cow who 'jumped over the moon'. But forget the jumbled history. It is the mad joy of these antics that has caused this nonsensical rhyme to take life in the imaginations of so many children – along with the grown-ups who love to recite the rhyme to them.

Humpty Dumpty (p.2-3) – 1803

Do you notice? There's no mention of an egg in this rhyme! One clever theory maintains that 'Humpty Dumpty' was actually a bulbous and brittle cast-iron cannon that fell off a high wall in Colchester during the English Civil War (1642–49), shattering into fragments that the soldiers of King Charles I could not repair – a fine example of an explanation that seems almost as odd as the rhyme itself. But 'Boule, Boule' in France and 'Wirgele-Wargele' in Germany do appear to be eggy characters that have inspired similar cautionary stories long before the 1640s. The universal moral of the riddle – with or without eggs – is that the human condition is fragile. Pride goes before a fall.





Hickety Pickety (p.4) – 1853

Hickety Pickety (some versions prefer 'Higgledy-Piggledy') first appeared in print in England in 1853, then seven years later in America – offering her services to a different set of customers: 'Hickety-Pickety, my black hen, She lays eggs for the railroad men.' Both verses were cleaned-up versions of an older and far less proper tale of 'Little Blue Betty' who 'lived in a den. She sold good ale to gentlemen. Gentlemen came every day – and little Blue Betty hopped away. She hopped upstairs to make her bed.'