

Iron Beans



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IRON BEANS

Chapter One

*“School dinners, school dinners,
Iron beans, iron beans,
Sloppy semolina, sloppy semolina,
I feel sick! Get a bowl quick!”*

Jenny sang to herself as she pushed baked beans around her plate.

“What’s that, Jenny?”

Jenny hadn’t seen Mrs MacNail approaching. Yet the dinner lady was suddenly standing over her with her hands on her hips and a steely glint in her eye.

“Nothing.” Quickly Jenny stuffed half a sausage into her mouth.

“Good!” said Mrs MacNail. “At Inkwell School, we polish our plates, and no complaints!”

Mrs MacNail was so strong that she could hold six school dinners on a tray in each hand and not spill a drop of gravy. When she rolled her sleeves up you could see a tiny tortoise tattooed on her muscular arm.

She marched round the tables, checking who had eaten what. “Come along, eat up! No pudding until you’ve finished your first course.”

You didn’t argue with Mrs MacNail. The children hastily scooped up their food.

Jenny had finished both her sausages. She'd eaten all her potato waffle. She'd mopped up her gravy. Only the beans were left.

She poked at a bean with her fork. It felt as hard as a pebble.

"Iron beans *again!*" groaned Jenny. "Where does Mrs MacNail get them?"

"They're like bullets," agreed Harry.

"Beans are good for you!" boomed Mrs MacNail. "They'll make you grow up big and strong."

Jenny shovelled beans into her mouth until Mrs MacNail turned away again. Then she spat them back out onto her plate.

"Oh, Jenny! *Yuck!*" wailed Grace.

"I don't care," said Jenny. "I hate school beans." And she boldly picked up a forkful of beans and flicked them out of the open window into the playground.

"Hear that?" she said. "Hear them go clang when they hit the ground?"

"Jenny!" gasped Grace. "You can't do that!"

"I just did," said Jenny. Happily she dug into her apple sponge and custard.

Harry stared out of the window with a puzzled frown.

"I didn't hear a clang," he said. "But I can hear something else..."

Outside the window there was a small, shuffling rustle. Although it was only faint at first, it quickly grew louder.

Soon it was much more than just a rustle. It creaked and scraped and grated as if there was an invisible bulldozer just beyond the window. Everybody stared out: yet there was nothing to be seen....

... until a long, grey, twining stem came creeping up the outside of the window.

A hundred mouths fell open. A hundred forks paused in mid-air. Two hundred staring eyes watched the plant grow – and grow – and grow. It swayed from side to side as it reached upwards. Soon it was beyond the top of the window.

Grey buds sprouted from the stem. The buds unfolded into silver leaves. By now the window was so crowded with leaves that the dining-room grew dark.

“Can we go outside?” cried Jenny. She ran out without waiting for Mrs MacNail to answer. Harry and a few other children followed her.

The grey stem was still growing. Jenny put out a hand and touched it. It wasn't a tree, although it was as thick as a tree-trunk. The twisted stalk was as smooth and cold as metal. The leaves shimmered and rustled like tin-foil. The top spiralled up into the clouds.

“It's a beanstalk – an *iron* beanstalk!” she exclaimed.

Suddenly the beanstalk quivered. It began to shake violently. The leaves trembled with a hissing sound, like a thousand angry snakes.

“Something's coming down it!” Harry cried.

Chapter Two

Crunch, crunch, crunch....

High above her head, she saw a pair of huge, grey, iron boots. They were slowly climbing down towards her.

The other children panicked.

“It’s the giant!” they wailed, pushing and shoving to get back into school.

Only Jenny and Harry stayed outside. The iron boots climbed down the last few branches and landed on the ground with a thud.

Above the boots was a pair of long, long legs. Above the legs was a huge body. On top of the body was an iron helmet.

“I don’t like the look of this,” said Harry.

Neither did Jenny, but she wasn’t going to run away now. Pretending she felt brave, she straightened her shoulders and shouted up at the helmet.

“What do you want?”

A pair of giant hands lifted off the helmet and put it down, revealing a giant face: a huge, pale, sad, thin face.

The giant stared around. He bent down and peered through the school windows. He put his long nose to the door. He sniffed.

He looked at Jenny. Then he spoke in a voice that rumbled like a lorry.

“I’M HUNGRY,” he said dolefully.

“Uh-oh!” said Harry. “I knew it! He wants to eat us!”

“We wouldn’t be very nice,” said Jenny. “All chewy.” And she shouted upwards,

“What sort of food do you eat?”

The giant thought about it.

“EGGS, MOSTLY,” he rumbled sadly. “GOLDEN EGGS FROM MY GOLDEN GOOSE.”

“That sounds all right,” said Harry.

“IT’S NOT ALL RIGHT. HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO EAT NOTHING BUT EGGS? GOLDEN OMELETTES, GOLDEN PANCAKES, GOLDEN BOILED EGGS, FRIED AND SCRAMBLED.”

The giant’s eyes glittered. His voice rose. “I’M FED UP OF GOLDEN EGGS. AND I’M **HUNGRY!**”

“In that case,” said Jenny, “You’d better come in.”

Harry was horrified. “What? You can’t ask him into school!” he hissed at her. “You heard what he said. He’s fed up of eggs. He might decide to try children for a change!”

“Then we’ll have to feed him something else instead,” said Jenny. “Go and tell Mrs MacNail a giant’s come to lunch.”

Harry ran off. Jenny opened the big double doors.

“Come in,” she said.

“I’LL TRY,” said the giant doubtfully.

He had to almost fold himself in half to squeeze in through the doors. Then he got wedged in the corridor, but he pushed and pushed until he burst into the dining-room.

Luckily the school dining-room had a high ceiling. The giant only needed to stoop a little.

He looked at a chair.

“Don’t sit on that,” said Jenny. “Try a bench. It’s stronger.”

The giant lowered himself onto a bench. He rested a table on his knees. He looked most uncomfortable.

“WELL?” he said. “WHERE’S MY LUNCH? I HOPE IT’S SOMETHING TASTY.”

He licked his lips and stared around at the children who sat frozen at their tables. Two hundred wide eyes stared back nervously.

Even Jenny felt uneasy. What if the giant didn’t like school dinners? She was taking a terrible risk...

Chapter Three

“WELL? WHERE’S MY LUNCH?” boomed the giant, with a frown.

Jenny looked around at the half-empty plates on the tables. They were far too small to fill up a giant.

Just then, Mrs MacNail marched out of the kitchen carrying a tray. She did not seem to think there was anything strange about having a giant in her dining-room.

“What’s all the fuss for? Here it is!” she said.

She put the tray down in front of the giant. It was heaped with school dinner.

There was a mountain of sausages, a hill of potato waffles, a castle of apple sponge... and swimming around in the middle was a lake of beans.

Mrs MacNail stood back and folded her arms.

“Right! Eat up, now, and no playing with your food!” she said briskly.

The giant gave her a scared look. He picked up Mrs MacNail’s biggest serving spoon from the tray. It looked like a doll’s spoon in his enormous fingers.

He opened his mouth as wide as a cave, and tossed in half a dozen sausages. He chewed.

The children held their breath.

“URG,” said the giant.

“*Urg?* What do you mean, *Urg?*” demanded Mrs MacNail.

“They’re my best sausages!”

“OH! THEY’RE... LOVELY,” said the giant unhappily.

He picked up a huge handful of potato waffles, crisp and gold. He popped them into his mouth like peanuts.

His face grew longer still.

“OOH,” he said.

“Ooh?” cried Mrs MacNail. “*Ooh?* Don’t tell me you don’t like my waffles!”

“OH, NO,” said the giant. “I MEAN, ER, OH YES. DELICIOUS.”

“Well, get a move on, then! I want to see an empty tray.”

The giant looked terrified. He scooped up an enormous slab of apple sponge and ate it in one bite.

“EEK,” he said.

Mrs MacNail looked most indignant. She put her hands on her hips and glared at the giant.

“*Eek?* My amazing, famous apple sponge, and all you can say is *Eek?*”

The giant dropped his spoon. He looked at his plate and sniffed. A giant tear trickled down his face.

“Now, now,” said Mrs MacNail more gently. “I’ll let you off the apple sponge, as long as you eat up all your beans.”

“Oh, no!” murmured Jenny. “The beans’ll finish him off. They’re *horrible*. He’s going to hate them!”

Reluctantly, the giant scooped up a giant, dripping spoonful of baked beans and ladled them into his mouth.

He chewed. He swallowed.

And then... he smiled.

“NOT BAD!” he said.

Eagerly he scraped up more beans with his spoon.

“IN FACT, THEY’RE LOVELY!” he declared.

Some of the children who had beans left on their plates ran to tip them onto his tray. As fast as they poured the beans on, the giant spooned and slurped them into his mouth.

At last every single bean was gone. The giant sat back with a happy sigh.

“URP,” he said.

“Manners!” said Mrs MacNail.

“THAT WAS WONDERFUL! THANK YOU.”

“I should hope so too,” she said.

The giant patted his full stomach. “I’LL COME HERE FOR LUNCH EVERY DAY!”

“Oh, no you won’t! There’s no room for you in here,” Mrs MacNail told him sternly. “I don’t mind once, but once is enough.”

The giant opened his mouth to complain. Then he looked at Mrs MacNail and closed it again. You didn’t argue with Mrs MacNail.

His giant shoulders sagged. He looked very unhappy.

Chapter Four

“I’M SO TIRED OF EGGS,” said the giant pitifully. “AND THAT’S ALL I’VE GOT IN MY CASTLE.”

“That’s not my problem,” said Mrs MacNail. “Eggs are very good for you. Almost as good as beans.”

But Jenny felt sorry for the giant. “Mrs MacNail? I’ve got an idea,” she said.

“What is it?”

Jenny whispered in the dinner lady’s ear.

“Hmm,” said Mrs MacNail. “What, *all* of them?”

“All of them,” said Jenny firmly. “Or he’ll be back for lunch next week. You don’t want that, do you?”

“Well, all right,” said Mrs MacNail. She strode into her kitchen. When she came out she was pushing three big boxes on a trolley. The boxes were full of tins.

Each box had a label. The giant slowly read the letters:

MACNAIL’S BEST

BAKED BEANS

GIANT SIZE

His eyes grew wide. “FOR ME?” he said. “*FOR ME?*”

“For you,” said Mrs MacNail. “So you’ll grow big and strong.”

The giant’s face split into a huge red grin. He stood up, hitting the ceiling. Then, tucking the boxes under one arm, he squeezed out through the doors.

Outside, he put the iron helmet back on with a clank.

He set an iron boot upon the beanstalk, and began to climb.

The silver leaves rustled and swayed as the iron boots climbed higher and higher, until they reached the clouds.

“He’s gone,” said Jenny at last, peering up.

Then the beanstalk began to shake.

Its branches waved wildly. Its roots burst from the soil. The whole beanstalk was being hauled up to the clouds.

As the stalk went up, something else came down. Hundreds and hundreds of long, grey, iron bean-pods were shaken from the stalk. They clattered on to the ground.

Jenny bent and picked one up. When she shook it, a dozen beans spilled out into her hand.

Small, grey beans, as hard as bullets. All around her, bean-pods were splitting open and pouring thousands of grey beans onto the ground.

She looked up, but the beanstalk had completely disappeared.

“Back into school, everyone!” announced Mrs MacNail. “You’ve got exactly five minutes to finish your lunch!”

And back into school everyone went, because you didn’t argue with Mrs MacNail.

Jenny sat down at her table and scraped up the last of her cold custard.

“At least I don’t have to eat my beans,” she said. “Ever again. The giant’s got them all!”

“No more iron beans! *Win!*” said Harry gleefully.

All the children took up the chant.

“Goodbye to iron beans! Goodbye to iron beans!”

Mrs MacNail bustled past them with a broom. Through the window, Jenny could see her sweeping up the beans that had fallen from the beanstalk. Soon she had a huge, grey pile.

Jenny frowned. "I wonder what Mrs MacNail's going to do with all those iron beans?" she murmured.

Mrs MacNail glanced up at her, and winked.

Jenny decided to say nothing....

After all, you didn't argue with Mrs MacNail.

The End

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