

A BAD CASE OF SHELL SHOCK

QUESTION: *Humpty Dumpty is usually portrayed as an egg, but I can find no evidence in the nursery rhyme to support this. Are there other now-obscure verses, or are we just following the assumptions of illustrators like Tenniel?*

HUMPTY Dumpty was taller than a house, he was made of wood, probably had a coat of hides, and sat on little wheels. When he was built, over 300 years ago, he was one of a pair, but his brother did not even get to the wall.

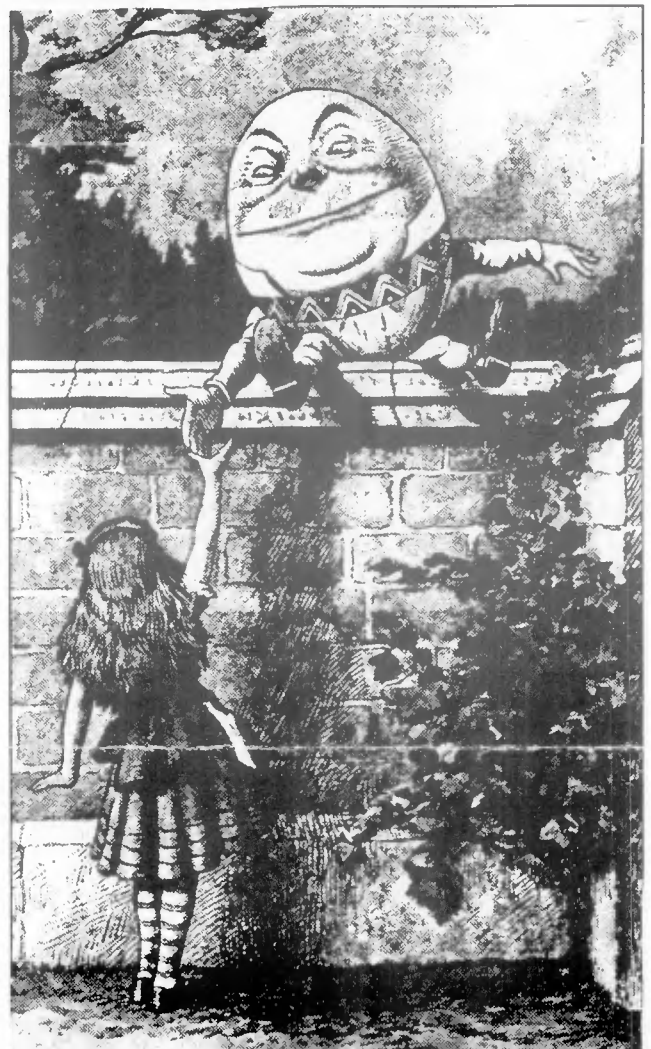
Humpty Dumpty was not an egg - he was a siege tower (probably one of the last ever built in Britain). These wooden structures were pushed against a castle or town wall by besiegers in an attempt to gain entry by storm. The biggest problem was getting them close enough to the wall: they were big, clumsy, top heavy (especially when they had troops on board) and had to be moved by hand on ground that was sometimes neither level nor firm. The whole procedure was very precarious and prone to accidents.

Humpty Dumpty was constructed during the English Civil War by Royalist forces ("all the King's horses and all the King's men") while they were besieging a town held for Parliament. We know Humpty got to the wall and that he fell with such power as to make it impossible to put him together again. But did he fall or was he pushed? - *Ian Taylor, Birmingham.*

WHEN Alice first sees Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through The Looking Glass*, she says: "How exactly like an egg he is." Humpty Dumpty replies: "It's very provoking to be called an egg!" (Later he says "My name means the shape I am, and a good handsome shape it is too"). Tenniel's illustration simply uses Lewis Carroll's text.

There is a belief that the verse was originally a riddle, and the answer is "an egg". This pre-dates the publication of *Alice Through The Looking Glass*, and Lewis Carroll made use of a common tradition. However, eggs are not normally placed on walls (although this may have been to make the riddle more confusing), and the verse has never appeared in a book of riddles.

The Oxford English Dictionary records that the expression "Humpty Dumpty" was the name of an ale and brandy punch in the late 17th century. The use of the expression "Humpty Dumpty" to describe a short or unattractive person first occurs in Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* in 1785. The rhyme itself is not recorded before the early 19th century, when several variants were



Cracking the riddle: Alice meets Tenniel's version of Humpty Dumpty.

published in Britain and the United States, although these may have been of earlier origin.

All evidence suggests that "Humpty Dumpty" has always been a self-contained four-line verse. Some differences in the final two lines are recorded (for example "Threescore men and threescore more, / Cannot place Humpty Dumpty as he was before"), but all versions follow the same basic pattern.

Continental versions are also recorded in the early 19th century. For example, "Rüntzelken-Püntzelken" and "Hümpelken-Pümpelken" in Germany, "Boule Boule" in France and "Thille Lille" in Sweden.

Efforts to explain Humpty Dumpty as a siege tower (Notes & Queries, March 26) are not wholly satisfactory, as the verse makes it clear that Humpty Dumpty could not be repaired by human agency. An army could repair a damaged siege tower or build a new one, but human science cannot fully repair a broken egg. Of course, this ignores the possibility that the verse may have been devised for no other purpose than to amuse. - **Robert Halliday, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk.**

THE THEORY that the verses refer to a siege engine used at Gloucester in 1643 is merely a jeu d'esprit contrived in 1956 by Dennis Daube, and popularised subsequently by Richard Rodney Bennett in the opera, All the King's Men. - **Roy Palmer, Dymock,**

Gloucestershire.

IT WAS "a short clumsy person" who had a great fall - the sort of fall (into pregnancy) that the French, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Swiss and German versions of the rhyme warn their daughters about.

This meaning is confirmed by the game played while reciting this verse. The girls 'sit down holding their skirts tightly about their feet. At an agreed signal, they throw themselves backwards and must recover their balance without letting go their skirts" (Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes).

In the 1846 version it's the "40 doctors and 40 wrights" who "couldn't put Humpty Dumpty to rights". But I prefer the restored version in Norman Iles' Who Really Killed Cock Robin (published by Robert Hales, 1986):

*Plumpty-Dumpty sat on a wall
Plumpty-Dumpty had a great fall
All the king's doctors, all the king's laws
Couldn't put Plumpty back as she was.*

Adult rhymes were censored into childishness, as Iles's book explains. - **S. Makepeace-Brown, Llandyssol, Dyfed.**

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