

# Jack of All Trades

by K.C. Shaw

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## Prologue: It Pays to Advertise

“You’ll never get anywhere, Pepper, if you don’t advertise.” Jack set his leather bag down in the grass and rummaged inside it, taking out a hammer, a jar of nails, and a square of cardboard. He glanced down at Pepper, who watched him without comprehension but with her usual boundless good humor. “When I say *you*, of course I mean *me*.”

He laughed, and Pepper opened her remarkable jaws wide in a doglike grin. She looked a little like an oversized bulldog, except that she was bright red and had a long tail. Her smoothly-scaled hide gleamed in the morning sunshine.

Jack turned to the wooden fence beside him. It was sturdy, and while it wasn’t in a particularly busy location, the same could be said of the entire town. He and Pepper stood on the edge of Tolchester’s main thoroughfare, a neatly kept dirt road. It was entirely deserted.

Jack nailed the cardboard to the fence with four swift strokes, handling the hammer with the ease of long use. When he was done he stepped back to examine his handiwork.

The card was cheaply printed, but drew the eye. It read:

Jack of All Trades  
Jack Bywater, 17 Lonas Lane  
Carpenter \* Plumber \* Cook \* Wizard \* Smith  
Coach Driver \* Beastmaster \* Scribe \* Musician  
*I can turn my hand to anything*

“That’s sure to get us some trade,” Jack said. He rubbed his beard absently with his knuckles. He had only grown the beard recently and wasn’t certain he liked it; it was short and tidy, dark brown like his hair. Jack himself was not very tall and was a little stout, but he looked strong as well. If people are said to grow to look like their dogs, Jack had grown to look like his dragon: friendly, open, and perhaps just a bit stupid.

“Here—you! You can’t post notices on that fence. It’s private property.”

Jack turned and tipped his hat to the approaching policeman. “I’m sorry, constable. I didn’t know. I’ll remove it at once.”

“See that you do that,” the constable said, but he sounded mollified and a little distracted. He stared down at Pepper. “Is that animal safe?”

“Of course. That’s Pepper; she’s quite tame. Pepper, sit up.”

Pepper had been slouched in the grass with her tail trailing into the street. She sat up on her haunches now, forepaws folded against her barrel chest, and watched Jack’s face. Sitting like that, her head came nearly to Jack’s waist.

“Good girl.” Jack bent down and rested his hand on the dragon’s head for a moment. She relaxed and grinned again, her pointed tongue lolling over a double row of fangs. “See? She’s as tame as a dog.”

The constable looked unconvinced, but as Pepper was now leaning against Jack’s legs and gazing up at him adoringly, he apparently could find nothing to complain about. “Well, see that you keep her under control. She could do a great deal of damage to livestock.”

“I shall be very careful, I promise. I shouldn’t like to spook anyone’s cattle or sheep, even by accident. That wouldn’t be a good way to meet new neighbors.” Jack smiled and began prying the nails

from the fence.

“Oh, so you’re the man who’s taken Rose Cottage, are you?” The last traces of suspicion disappeared from the constable’s round face.

“Is that what it’s called? It’s a good name; I’ve never seen more roses in one garden.”

“That was thanks to old Mr. Segall, who had the house until last autumn. He moved to Hillgate to live with his daughter. A keen gardener.” The constable caught the card, which, freed from its last nail, fluttered away from the fence. “Beastmaster?” he said, after reading the card. “Do you know much about horses?”

“Oh, yes. Do you have a beast you need trained or retrained?”

The constable pushed his helmet back to rub his forehead. Jack thought he looked a bit worried. “My nephew has a colt he can’t break. There’s something odd wrong with it, my nephew says, and he knows horses—he keeps the finest stable in the county.”

“I’d be happy to take a look—free of charge, as I’m new to town.”

“Oh? That’s generous. I’ll tell him to expect you tomorrow, then; Goodacre, his name is.”

“I look forward to meeting him. In the meantime, is there someplace where I can post my notices lawfully?”

“There’s a board at market. Take the third left and go a quarter mile; you’ll see it.” The policeman gestured down the road, then offered Jack’s card back to him.

“Do keep it. I have more.” Jack tipped his hat again. “Thanks very much. Come along, Pepper.”

With Pepper ambling at his heels, and his bag of notices over his shoulder, Jack walked along the street. It was a stroke of luck that he had a job first thing, after only moving into Rose Cottage two days before. Sometimes it took him weeks to get his first nibble, particularly in the smaller villages. Close-knit communities were always the most suspicious of outsiders.

Tolchester seemed a friendly place, though. He liked the look and feel of it, and trusted his judgment in such matters. It was only a pity that he couldn’t stay.

He couldn’t stay anywhere for very long, no matter how much he wished he could. *It* would catch up to him.

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## Chapter One: The Mad Colt

The May morning was drenched in sunshine and glorious with birdsong. Jack strode down the lane, his dragon Pepper padding behind him with her tail carried clear of the ground like a crocodile’s, and felt himself smiling. The hedges were full of flowers, the fields full of lambs and calves; the world was full of promise. Jack paused a moment beside a fence to watch a pair of lambs gambol; they pirouetted and leaped like ballerinas, or like butterflies that hadn’t quite found their wings.

Jack had dressed for a morning working with horses, and wore light tweeds with a slouch cap and hobnail boots. Every so often he rubbed his beard with his knuckles, as though checking that it was still there and hadn’t shaved itself off during the night.

“I have a good feeling about today, Pepper,” he said, and Pepper rolled her eyes up to him at the sound of her name. Her pupils were round and black but with whites all around them, like a person’s eye, which gave her an unexpectedly friendly expression.

Goodacre’s farm was larger than Jack had imagined, a patchwork of fields and paddocks separated by white fences. The stables and barns were painted white too, and looked well-kept. Elegant tall horses grazed in the fields.

Mr. Goodacre and several farmhands waited in the lane; Jack had no trouble telling which of the men was the constable’s nephew, for he had the same round face with disarmingly keen eyes. Jack sized him up professionally as they shook hands: a good businessman, with native cunning rather than education, blunt but fair.

“What the devil is that creature you’ve got there?” Mr. Goodacre said. Pepper, sitting next to Jack and leaning against his leg, grinned up at him.

“That’s Pepper. She’s a species of dragon.”

Mr. Goodacre stared at Pepper for a few minutes, frowning. “She doesn’t look much like the dragons we get roosting on the moor. She won’t spook my horses?”

“Absolutely not. Tell me about this colt of yours—your uncle said there was something wrong with him?”

“I don’t know.” Mr. Goodacre gave a slight shrug, looking worried. “I’ve not seen one like him in all my days, and I’ve had every kind of problem horse through my hands and got them broke with no difficulties. I’ve been calling this colt Blaze, but some of the lads have renamed him Bucephalus, after the horse that old king tamed—and we’ve no king to hand.”

Jack smiled and rested his hand on Pepper’s head. “My mother’s maiden name was King. Will that do?”

Mr. Goodacre guffawed. “That’s good enough for me. Come along and look at the colt.”

Jack walked beside Mr. Goodacre, lengthening his stride to match the taller man’s. They passed a handsome large stable, its windows open to the sunshine, and crossed a barnyard that had been planed entirely smooth.

On the other side of the yard was a smaller stable, and from the smell of fresh wood and paint, and the building’s crisp look, it was new. Mr. Goodacre led them around the stable and said, “There he is. That’s his own paddock, and you can see there’s nothing visibly wrong with it or him. But he won’t let anyone touch his back, not even to groom it—not even to put a rug on him after he’s been worked on a line and sweated.”

The colt, a leggy two-year-old with bright bay coat shining in the sun, grazed in the paddock with a pony gelding as a companion. Jack looked the colt over, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. “You’ve examined his back, I suppose?”

“Yes, as well as I can. And I’ve had Dr. Baker over twice, fetching him all the way from Little Pinning. He’s the best horse doctor in the county. He can’t find a thing wrong with him either; he said it might be a sensitivity of his kidneys, though, particularly as this only started a few months ago.”

“A few months, you say?” Jack leaned on the fence, frowning in thought and watching the colt graze. “How long have you had him?”

“A year, just about. He was bred at Drake’s, and I know both the sire and the dam. His sire’s on the spirited side, but his dam’s intelligent and of good disposition. So’s Blaze, if it comes to that.”

“Hmm. You’ll allow me to examine him?”

“Go ahead, but be careful.”

“Pepper, stay.” Jack clambered over the fence and approached the colt confidently but slowly. He chirruped as he neared him and the colt raised his head.

“You’re a right beauty of a colt, Blaze,” Jack murmured. “I can see why Goodacre wants to keep you, but give him much more trouble and you may end up as dog meat.” Jack took the colt’s halter and scratched his throatlatch. Blaze looked friendly and interested, and gave a whicker of greeting.

The colt showed no reluctance in having his head or feet handled. Jack ran his hands over the horse’s face, down his legs, over his belly and rump, all with no ill response from Blaze. Only when he put his hand on Blaze’s barrel did the animal begin to tense.

“Afraid I’ll bother your back, are you?” Jack said. The colt’s back looked like any other horse’s back. There was no visible sign of any abnormality or healed injury. Perhaps some deformity of the spine that might be felt rather than seen.... Jack ran his hand up the colt’s shoulder, making soothing clucking sounds to ease Blaze’s increasing tension, and over the withers.

The next thing Jack knew, he was sprawled in the grass five yards away. He groaned.

Mr. Goodacre rushed over. “I did warn you,” he said. “That’s what he does, and he’ll kill someone one day. Are you all right?”

“I fancy he’s cracked one of my ribs.” Jack sat up gingerly. His side throbbed where the colt had

kicked him.

“Well, I thank you for coming out to try, but I think this colt will never be broke. Come in and have a cup of tea for your trouble, at least.” He helped Jack up and handed him his hat.

Jack looked back at Blaze, who had retreated a short distance and was grazing again, his black tail swishing. “I’m not ready to give up yet. Let me examine his stall first.”

Mr. Goodacre said, “It’s a new stable, and he has a big roomy loosebox. There’s nothing wrong with it, but you’re welcome to look about.” Jack noted the approval in the man’s voice.

The stall had two doors, one into the stable aisle and one leading to the colt’s paddock. Jack examined the latches closely. The aisle door had a wrought iron latch, but the paddock door had only a wooden bar that could be turned to open it.

“He can’t have injured himself on the latch,” Mr. Goodacre said. “He can’t even reach it.”

“No,” Jack said. He crouched down to look at the door. “Has he ever had anyone on his back?”

“Not that I know of.”

“No mischievous boys, perhaps, who might have got in and whipped him?”

“There’s not a boy in the county who would treat a colt that way. Besides, that would make him shy around boys, and he adores my sister’s lads.”

Jack turned the wooden bar back and forth, thinking. “Has he ever been injured at all?”

“No, never. Never had a moment’s trouble with him except for his accursed back.”

Jack straightened up. “I suspect this bar might be our culprit, in a way. Mr. Goodacre, I need to sleep in the colt’s stall tonight. You’re welcome to join me. I think I can solve your problem.”

“What is it?”

“I might be wrong, but I suspect he may be hag-ridden.”

“Hag-ridden! I never thought of that. We’ve never had any trouble with fairies in this area.”

“It only takes one. But they’re the devil to catch at it.”

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Mr. Goodacre hitched up his buggy and drove them into town for luncheon at the Hare and Hounds. Pepper caused some comment among the regulars, and Jack noticed that while Mr. Goodacre seemed pleased to introduce him, he was definitely proud to introduce Pepper—as though by showing Pepper off, Goodacre had scored some small victory among his friends. Jack was simply happy to be introduced at all.

They spent the afternoon letting Blaze get used to Pepper, for Jack wanted Pepper in the stall with them. But everyone liked Pepper. By nightfall the colt was as used to her as he was the farm dogs.

Jack observed the stable hands as the horses were bedded down for the night. The colt entered his stall without hesitation, ate and drank well, and leaned his head over the half-door into the aisle to watch the evening bustle with interest. “He’s intelligent, you can see that,” Jack said to Mr. Goodacre.

“So he is, and it’d be a shame to lose him. I hope your idea works, Mr. Bywater.”

“So do I. I’ll feel a fool if I’m wrong.”

The two of them, along with Pepper, joined Blaze in his stall once it grew dark. The colt snuffled at them as they stretched out in the straw—gingerly, in Jack’s case, as his cracked rib ached abominably. “If you hear or see anything tonight,” Jack said to Mr. Goodacre, “don’t make a noise until I’ve dealt with it.”

The stable was full of the sounds of content animals settling down to sleep. Jack rested his head on Pepper’s warm side and watched the door to the paddock. It was shut and barred, but the top half of the door had been left open, which Mr. Goodacre assured him was the usual practice in fine weather.

From his vantage point on the ground, Jack could see a square of sky above the door. It was deep blue with a few stars, but gradually the blue faded into black. Jack resisted the impulse to close his eyes for just a minute.

Pepper had no need to resist sleep. Soon she was snoring loudly, and Jack had to poke her to wake her up again. She licked his hand, her saliva burning like mustard until he wiped it on his trouser leg.

He was settling back against Pepper when Mr. Goodacre gave a small hiss that would have been inaudible if the night weren't so silent. Jack glanced at him; the stablemaster pointed at Blaze.

Blaze had been drowsing, but now he was awake and standing to nervous attention. He stared out the paddock door.

Jack turned his eyes to the door again. For a long minute there was no sign of anything unusual. Then Jack heard the sound of the wooden bar being moved stealthily.

He tensed. The sound stopped and the door swung open a few inches. Blaze snorted and shifted his feet in the straw.

Then there was a flurry of activity, all the more startling for its silence. A small figure darted into the stall and flung itself at Blaze, and a moment later had swarmed up his foreleg and was clinging with misshapen-looking limbs to the colt's back. Blaze threw his head up, eyes rolling white.

Jack spoke three well-chosen magic words and pointed at the creature. It froze and tumbled from the colt's back, but almost immediately began to move again.

Jack lunged and just caught it by one leg. The leg was hard and too-thin, slightly prickly.

The creature kicked, still eerily silent. Jack felt his grip slip and muttered an oath, then clenched his teeth against revulsion at touching the creature and grabbed for a better handhold. This time he felt smooth, slick flesh and stiff fur.

"Got it, I think. Strike a light," Jack said.

A match flared. "What in God's name is it?" Mr. Goodacre said.

"A fairy—a nasty one, too." Jack examined the struggling fairy quickly, feeling his mouth curve in a grimace of disgust. He had it by one cricket-like leg and one human-like arm. Its all-black eyes gleamed in the match light, its insect-like mouth worked silently. Two pairs of antennae twitched against his hands as though licking them.

"I've never seen a fairy like that," Mr. Goodacre said. "Revolting-looking thing, isn't it? What do we do with it?"

"We can do this, Mr. Goodacre," Jack said. "Pepper, catch!"

He tossed the fairy at Pepper, who was staring at it eagerly. Her great mouth gaped wide, snapped—and the fairy was gone.

The match went out, plunging the stable into darkness again. "My word," Mr. Goodacre breathed. "Won't it harm her insides?"

"Have no fear—I've yet to find anything that will harm Pepper's insides."

They secured the colt's stall door again and went into the farmhouse. It was warm inside and smelled of woodsmoke and baking; Jack followed Mr. Goodacre to the kitchen, which was warmer still.

"This is my wife, Jenny," Mr. Goodacre said with considerable pride. Mrs. Goodacre looked up and smiled as she took a pan from the oven; she was darkly pretty, and Jack felt a stab of jealousy. "Jenny, darling, Mr. Bywater has cured Blaze. Hag-ridden, he was!"

"The poor colt—no wonder he didn't want anyone on his back," Mrs. Goodacre said.

"Yes, and this particular fairy was a nasty spiky one," Jack said. "Could I possibly wash my hands?"

"Of course," Mrs. Goodacre said, and Jack washed his hands thoroughly at the kitchen sink. "What did you do with the fairy? It won't come back, will it?"

Mr. Goodacre guffawed and pointed at Pepper. "No, it won't come back—crunched up in that little dragon's not-so-little jaws. I wish I had a dragon."

"No, you don't," Jack said with feeling. "I wouldn't give her up for anything, but trust me—I've given up a lot to keep her."

"Well, I'm glad you brought her along." Mrs. Goodacre filled a dog bowl with water from the sink and set it on the stone floor; Pepper lapped messily.

Mr. Goodacre brought two bottles of beer up from the cellar; he and Jack sat down in a small but comfortable dining room. "Now, then, Mr. Bywater—how did you know? And will we have any other trouble with fairies?"

"That sort of fairy is solitary, fortunately. I doubt you'll find many more in the area. But I

recommend you change that wooden bar for an iron latch. Fairies don't like the magic in iron; they won't touch it. That's what gave me the clue, since nothing else seemed to fit. I don't envy you the difficulty you'll have with retraining Blaze."

"Ah, well, we'll take it slow and easy, give him time to realize that horrid prickly thing won't ride on his back anymore. It must have been a torture."

"And it would have taken its toll on his health soon enough."

Mrs. Goodacre came in with a plate of cakes. "How are you liking Rose Cottage, Mr. Bywater?" she said, setting the plate in front of him. "It's such a pretty place, I think."

"I think so too. And I'm very comfortable there, thanks. Tolchester seems a pleasant village so far."

"Oh yes, everyone here is very friendly. And we're always happy to have a new face."

Mr. Goodacre said, "That's true—although some of the women in Tolchester are nothing more than busybodies." He grinned and took a swig of beer. "Where are you from?"

Jack had just bit into a cake, and for a moment made appreciative noises while he chewed. "I knock about a fair bit," he said after he'd swallowed. "I lived in a village called West Blister last, but I don't expect you've heard of it. There wasn't much to recommend it; I didn't stay there long."

"Well, we hope you decide to settle down here," Mrs. Goodacre said, and her husband nodded.

Jack looked around the room, with its crackling fire and comfortable furniture, and noted particularly the womanly touches his own cottage lacked—a vase of flowers on the sideboard, lace curtains in the windows. "I'd like to, very much," he said, but he felt bleak inside.

He turned the conversation to horses, and listened with interest to Mr. Goodacre's talk of the local bloodlines. Mrs. Goodacre brought them fresh bottles, and they discussed the training and care of horses until all the cakes were gone.

At last Jack noticed Mr. Goodacre stifling a yawn, and realized how late it was getting. "I'd best be off home," he said, standing up. "Thanks for your hospitality."

"Thanks for your help today. Do you want a ride home? I can hitch up the buggy in no time; you ought to be careful of your rib."

"No, thanks—the walk will do me good. Pepper, wake up, girl. Time to go home."

Pepper had curled up with the Goodacres' rat terrier in front of the fire; she got up reluctantly, blinking, and followed Jack out the door.

Mr. and Mrs. Goodacre waved him goodbye from the doorway. Jack waved back, and paused for a moment while Pepper caught up to him. The house's windows shone in the darkness, friendly and cheerful. Jack turned away.

His rib ached, and he walked slowly. Once on the lane, with the trees nearly meeting overhead to shadow the moonlight, he slowed even more, afraid of stumbling. "Well, Pepper," he sighed, "we've found friends already. Mr. Goodacre's a lucky man, to have such a fine home and a beautiful wife."

He looked up through the branches at the stars, which shone clean and bright in a cloudless sky. "We might have till harvest, that's all—and then a new town, new friends to make if we can, new lodgings that never really feel like home."

But when he turned onto the path to Rose Cottage, its windows looked nearly as welcoming as the Goodacres' home. He was glad he'd left a lamp burning.

He built up the fire to chase the chill away, and went to bed. The ache in his ribs kept him from sleep, though. He lay awake for some time, staring at the ceiling and listening to Pepper snoring in the next room. He could feel the curse following him, traveling easily through the clear night.

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