NOODLEHEADS, TALL TALES, AND OTHER HUMOROUS STORIES

Lazy Jack

England

Jack, the hero who can outsmart giants, can be also a noodlehead. He exhibits his lack of common sense by taking everything that his mother says literally and by being impractical when solving problems. Yet he ends up lucky.

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003.


Once upon a time there was a boy whose name was Jack, and he lived with his mother on a dreary common. They were very poor, and the old woman got her living by spinning, but Jack was so lazy that he would do nothing but bask in the sun in the hot weather, and sit by the corner of the hearth in the wintertime. His mother could not persuade him to do anything for her, and was obliged at last to tell him that if he did not begin to work for his porridge, she would turn him out to get his living as he could.

This threat at length roused Jack, and he went out and hired himself for the day to a neighboring farmer for a penny; but as he was coming home, never having had any money in his possession before, he lost it in passing over a brook. “You stupid boy,” said his mother, “you should have put it in your pocket.” “I’ll do so another time,” replied Jack.

The next day Jack went out again, and hired himself to a cowkeeper, who gave him a jar of milk for his day’s work. Jack took the jar and put it into the large pocket of his jacket, spilling it all, long before he got home. “Dear me!” said the old woman; “you should have carried it on your head.” “I’ll do so another time,” replied Jack.

The following day Jack hired himself again to a farmer, who agreed to give him a cream cheese for his services. In the evening, Jack took the cheese, and went home with it on his head. By the time he got home the cheese was completely spilt, part of it being lost, and part matted with his hair. “You stupid lout,” said his mother, “you should have carried it very carefully in your hands.” “I’ll do so another time,” replied Jack.

The day after this Jack again went out, and hired himself to a baker, who would give him nothing for his work but a large tomcat. Jack took the cat, and began carrying it very carefully in his hands, but in a short time pussy scratched him so much that he was compelled to let it go. When he got home, his mother said to him, “You silly fellow, you should have tied it with a string, and dragged it along after you.” “I’ll do so another time,” said Jack.

The next day Jack hired himself to a butcher, who rewarded his labours by the handsome present of a shoulder of mutton. Jack took the mutton, tied it to a string, and trailed it along after him in the dirt, so that by the time he had got home the meat was completely spoilt. His mother was this time quite out of patience with him, for the next day was Sunday, and she was obliged to content herself with cabbage for her dinner. “You ninnyhammer,” said she to her son, “you should have carried it on your shoulder.” “I’ll do so another time,” replied Jack.
On the Monday Jack went once more, and hired himself to a cattle-keeper, who gave him a donkey for his trouble. Although Jack was very strong, he found some difficulty in hoisting the donkey on his shoulders, but at last he accomplished it, and began walking slowly home with his prize. Now it happened that in the course of his journey there lived a rich man with his only daughter, a beautiful girl, but unfortunately deaf and dumb; she had never laughed in her life, and the doctors said she would never recover till somebody made her laugh. Many tried without success, and at last the father, in despair, offered her in marriage to the first man who could make her laugh. This young lady happened to be looking out of the window, when Jack was passing with the donkey on his shoulders, the legs sticking up in the air; and the sight was so comical and strange, that she burst out in a great fit of laughter, and immediately recovered her speech and hearing. Her father was overjoyed, and fulfilled his promise by marrying her to Jack, who was thus made a rich gentleman. They lived in a large house, and Jack’s mother lived with them in great happiness until she died.