

Mother's Darling Jack

Mite Kremnitz

Romanian

Easy

23 min read

Once upon a time something happened. If it had not happened it would not be told.

There was once a man who had a child. This child was the youngest of seven which the Lord had given him, so it was destined from its birth to be lucky. It was christened John, because all dunces and upstarts are named John. The father loved little Jack like the very apple of his eye. It could not have been otherwise, since the boy was the youngest of seven children and the smallest, chubbiest, and fattest of them all. But the father doesn't count for every thing. He comes and goes, appears and vanishes, the house is only a sleeping-place for him. The mother is the real soul of the household; she bathes one, feeds another, and scrubs for a third. Jack was his mother's boy, his mother's pet, his mother's darling, his mother's handsomest and brightest child.

They say it is not well for one person to be every thing, the lowest to be highest, and the child to govern the house. Jack grew larger every day, and the larger he grew the more quarrelsome, obstinate, and consequently self-willed he became. So there was often, nay, to tell the whole truth, *very* often, anger in the house on the boy's account. Jack daily heard some harsh word; but as it proved that words made no impression, punishment frequently followed. Ah! but Jack was the youngest of seven. The one who punished suffered, not the one who was chastised. If the father whipped Jack, the mother wiped away his tears; if the mother slapped him, she took care not to let her husband know it. It is a bad example, when a child breaks a pot, for the mother to set to

work to pick up the pieces; things are then in a bad way, and it is well not to waste another word about them.

So it ended. Jack became a very disobedient child, and disobedience avenges itself on the disobedient. If his father wanted to teach him anything, and said: "My dear Jack, look, do it so, this is right; this is the way oxen are harnessed in front of carts, this is the way the nail is driven into the wheel, this is the way sacks are carried," and other useful lessons, Jack's mind was fixed on other things, and he replied, "Oh! let me alone." And so from one "Oh! let me alone," to another "Oh! let me alone," Jack grew into a big boy without having even learned so much as that a plow has handles, a mill is not a mortar, and a cow is not an ox. And he couldn't do much in this way.

One day his father was preparing to go to the fair. Every thing was ready except one pin, which had not yet been put through the yoke.

"Father," said Jack, "I'm coming with you."

"It will be better for you to stay at home, that you may not be lost in the market," replied his father.

"I want to go—"

"I won't take you."

"I *will* go."

"I won't take you."

Every body knows what forward children are. The instant they are told that a thing can't be had, they want to seize it by force. His father could not help himself, so he set Jack in the wagon and drove off with him to the fair.

"Mind," he said, "you must keep close to me." "Yes, father," said Jack, obediently, for the first time in the memory of the family. And until they reached the end of the village, Jack sat as if he were nailed to the back of the cart. At the end of the village he put out one foot, then he raised his head and began to look around him. Finally he stood up, leaned on the side of the cart, and began to watch the wheels. He could not understand how one wheel moved of its own accord, how one spoke hurried after another, constantly going forward

without stirring from the spot, nay, without moving from under his own nose.

They reached the woods. Jack perked up his nose and stared with his mouth wide open. The trees on the right and left set out and ran with all their might, one after another. There must be witchcraft in it. Jack jumped out of the cart and again felt the solid ground under his feet. But he once more stood with his mouth wide open. The trees now stood still, but the cart moved on further and further. "Stop, father, stop, so I can see how the wheels turn," the boy called after a while.

But now his hair fairly bristled with fear. He heard his shout repeated from ten different directions, while his father drove on without noticing his cry. "Father!" he called again, and again he heard the word ten times. Jack was terribly frightened, and seeing that no place was as pleasant as home, began to run back there. Nothing but a cloud of dust could be seen behind him. He ran on and on toward home till he turned into the wrong road.

Now you can see how unfortunate it is for inexperienced people not to listen to the advice of wiser ones! Jack had done wrong in trying to run home when he did not know the way through the forest. He ran for a long time, then gradually slackened his pace and at last began to walk, but kept on through forest after forest, across a meadow, and through the woods again, then across another meadow, till he was completely tired out, and weary of his life.

"Lord, have mercy on me, I will always be obedient in future," he cried, at last—and his heart must have been very heavy when he uttered such words.

After that he did not walk much further. A short distance off, on the edge of the woods, stood a village. Jack jumped for joy when he saw it, and did not stop till he was in the middle of it. Then he went from house to house, and the further he went the more he wondered that he found all kinds of houses except his own home. He did not know what to do, and began to cry.

"What are you crying about, my son?" asked a man who was coming back from the fields in front of a cart drawn by four oxen.

Jack told his story, and the man pitied him. "What is your name?" asked the kind-hearted peasant. "Jack," replied the boy.

“But your father, what is his name?”

“His name is father,” the lad answered.

“What is the village where you belong called?”

“Village!” he said.

So Jack could answer no questions, and the man could do nothing to help him. He therefore took him into his service as plow-boy, for he needed just such a lad to guide the oxen while he held the handles of the plow. Thus Jack became the servant of a worthy man in the village on the edge of the forest. But he was of little use, because he had not paid attention when good instruction was given him. And whoever does not know how to do any thing well, must expect a great deal of scolding.

One day Jack’s master was preparing to go to market. “Listen, Jack,” he said, “grease the cart thoroughly, for we’re going to market to-morrow.”

Jack said “Yes,” took the grease, and began to scratch his head. He did not know how to grease a cart. He had never listened when he had been told, nor looked when he might have seen it; so now he did not know what to do. Finally, from what he had hitherto learned, he recollected that the beginning of a cart is at the yoke, that is, the pole. So he thought he must commence there if he wanted to do the business thoroughly. He greased the thills, the pole, even the rack of the cart. Here he stopped, for there was no grease left. So he went to ask for some.

“Master,” he said, after entering the room, “give me some more grease.”

“Why in the world do you want more grease?” replied his master angrily, “I gave you enough to grease the cart three times over.”

Jack said that there had only been enough for the thills, pole, and rack. When his master heard such words, he took Jack by the ear, led him out, and gave him such a beating that never again in his whole life did he forget that only the axles of a cart are to be greased. Well, what was the mother's darling to do—he was obliged to bear it, and then pay attention, that he might learn how to grease a cart.

After the cart was ready, the oxen were put in and the master took his seat in front, but Jack crouched in the back of the cart like a little heap of misery, sobbing now and then from having wept so much. "Silence," said his master sternly, "don't let me hear another word from you!" This was the last thing before they drove off.

Jack sat as still as a mouse; he was almost afraid to breathe. At last, this grew tiresome. So he began to watch the wheels again. But he was wiser now, and did not wonder at the wheels or the trees. Yet he saw something he could not understand. Often as he had seen a wheel go round, he had never noticed the pin spring from it. The cart passed over a big stone, and, "klirr," the pin bounced out of the axle and fell on the ground. It was pretty to look at, but the lad didn't understand it. He would have liked to ask his master, but the farmer had ordered him to be silent. After some time the nut loosened. Jack thought he understood why. Directly after—bump dropped the nut, too, and was left behind the cart. Jack started and was going to say something, but looked at his master and remembered that he had been ordered to keep still. But one thing he did understand—if the nut had dropped on account of the nail, the wheel would come off for want of the nut. He had scarcely comprehended this, when crack! the wheel fell into the dust and was left behind the cart.

The cart moved on awhile upon three wheels, then it upset, breaking the pole in two. Now they were in a bad fix.

"There it is," cried Jack in terror, "didn't I say that would happen?"

We will waste no more words on this subject! The farmer was in *such* a rage! To be in the middle of the road with a broken pole is no joke. The farmer seized Jack, gave him another sound thrashing, and then told him to be off that he might cause him no more trouble. He was really in the wrong, for he had himself forbidden Jack to speak. But Jack was to blame, too—if he had always obeyed, he would have learned long before just how far such an order went. He had been too obedient, obstinately obedient. And that isn't well either.

The farmer continued his journey as best he could, but Jack was left on foot in the middle of the road. Alas!

Woe betide him, I really don't know what he is to do. He turned into a path he did not know, and hoped to reach home. Again he walked over meadows and through forests, walked for a long, long time, till his feet would scarcely carry him. This time he found a village in a beautiful meadow, and outside the village was a man watching a flock of sheep grazing.

"How do you do, good sir!"

"Thank you kindly, may you grow tall, my son."

One word led to another, and Jack briefly told the man his whole story, from beginning to end, and the peasant was pleased, because, just at that time, he needed a shepherd-boy to drive the little flock to pasture, lead them to water, and watch them that they might not mingle with others. They were a particular breed of sheep, and he would not have had them injured on any account. Such sheep, it was reported, were owned only by one emperor, from whom the peasant had obtained the single lamb. So they were sheep, well—we can imagine how beautiful they were, since they had descended from a lamb that belonged to an emperor!

Jack was glad, too, because he found himself in luck again. So they made a bargain, and Jack became a shepherd boy.

"You must watch the sheep the whole livelong day, drive them down into the valley to drink, and when it grows dark bring them back to the fold. If it seems cold, make a fire at the entrance of the pen, and that the sheep may not freeze, drive them into the fold." These were the peasant's orders, and Jack said he would do exactly as he was told.

During the day Jack watched the sheep; when he was thirsty he led them down to drink, and as it grew dark drove them to the fold. This fold was a strange contrivance. Jack had never seen one before. It was inclosed by a fence of woven willow branches, roofed with rushes that the rain might not injure it, but in one place an opening had been left, over which was a roof made of reeds, supported by posts. "That's the entrance to the fold," said Jack to himself, delighted with his penetration.

As he was cold he made a fire in the opening, just under the reed-roof. A fire is a fine thing, and Jack warmed himself by it. Then he remembered that his master had told him he must drive the sheep into the fold, to keep them from freezing. True, he did not understand why they should be any warmer inside the fold than outside,

but he did as he was ordered. Seizing the finest ram, the one which wore the big bell round its neck, he pushed it through the opening into the fold. But lo and behold! The fire was burning in the gap, and the ram was so scorched that not a thread of wool was left on its body.

“Oho, now I understand it,” cried Jack, still more pleased. “The sheep must go through the fire to keep them from freezing.”

And, as he felt that he was doing right, he thrust all the sheep into the fold one after the other.

Suddenly he noticed that the fence, the thatching, and the roof above the opening had all taken fire and were blazing merrily. Jack stood perfectly still. He had never seen any thing of the sort and rejoiced over carrying out his orders so well, for he perceived that the sheep could not possibly be cold in the midst of the fire. So he contentedly watched the work he had accomplished. One thing he did wish—that his master was there, so that he might have said, “See how well I understand tending sheep.”

And the wish was fulfilled. His master was just sitting at the table eating bread and onions, because it was a fast day. He looked out of the window and saw a great fire on the mountains, and gazing more attentively at it, noticed that it was in the direction of his fold. This seemed queer. With his mouth full he left the house, walked faster and faster, broke into a run, and went higher and higher up the hill-side till at last, panting for breath, he reached his fold.

Alas! Alas! What a sight! The fold burned down, the sheep of the imperial breed one and all roasted, so that one might have supposed they were nothing but overripe melons. That was a bad job, really a very bad job! Jack had done a great deal of mischief, and might be thankful to escape with a flogging. And so it happened. The farmer, enraged, nay, fairly furious, seized the cunning shepherd and beat him, beat him so that he would have nearly killed him had not Jack luckily escaped from his hands. But after he got away Jack took to his heels and ran with all his might, so that he did not look round until he was in the woods.

What was to be done then? That’s the way a person fares when he has no sense! If he had behaved himself, he would have been sitting quietly in the house eating barley-sugar and milk.

Jack walked on and on through the forest, turning to the right and left, forward and backward, hither and thither, on and on he went, poor boy, trying to find some path that led home. He was so hungry and thirsty

that he sucked the dew from the leaves and ate the oak-apples and acorns he found on the ground; then he grew tired and cross and frightened. Woe betide any one who loses the way in a forest!

Night came on, and darkness surprised him in the terrible woods. His hair stood on end and he was so terrified that a chill ran through every vein when he heard the wolves, bears, and all sorts of wild beasts howling and panting in the forest. There was no escape now. Then he saw a large tree with a hole in its trunk big enough to shelter him. Nearing it he noticed that this hole had been hollowed out. That was all right. He would hide in it to keep from being devoured by the wild beasts, and was so delighted to find himself safe that he no longer felt sorrowful or hungry. When we have escaped a great danger, we no longer think of small annoyances. Jack fell asleep from fatigue, and was just dreaming that he was at home eating millet and milk, when suddenly, piff, paff, puff, he heard a shot and started up in terror.

What had happened? Only a few paces from him twelve big, horrible robbers, foot-pads, had assembled with their captain, made a fire, roasted an ox, and were just tapping a cask of good wine; they were going to have a carouse. When Jack saw the ox on the spit he began to feel almost famished. Dear me! he was so hungry that he would gladly have turned into a wood-worm and gnawed the tree. The poor lad, in his inexperience, did not know what terrible people robbers are, so he came out of the hole and approached them. This was not wise. Robbers are not to be trifled with.

Jack said he would like something to eat too. The robbers all stared at him, then drew their knives and swords and began to whet them to cut him in pieces and kill him before you could say Jack Robinson. That's the way with robbers. They don't stand on much ceremony.

"Stop," said one of them. "Might not this boy be useful to us?"

"How?" asked another.

"Perhaps he's the seventh child, then he can find the iron-wort for us," said the first speaker.

"That's true!" they all shouted.

So they questioned Jack, and were wild with delight when they learned that he actually was the seventh of seven children. The point in question was this—the robbers had learned that the emperor had received an

immense sum of money, all in gold, from a merchant who had long been his debtor; the wicked men wanted to steal this treasure. But the emperor had put it in a room closed with seven iron-barred doors, and on each door were seven locks wrought with great skill, so that no one could open them. So this was a real imperial business, which required careful consideration. Therefore, the robbers had gone to a witch, that she might give them instruction and a powerful charm by means of which they could force their way through the royal locks and iron-barred doors. The witch had told them that nothing except iron-wort would open the locks, and that the plant could be found only by the seventh of seven children while he was still an innocent child, in the gray dawn of morning, when it gleamed in the meadows among the other herbs. Moreover, whoever had the plant must then make a gash in his finger, lay it in the cut, and leave it there till the wound had healed, so that it might remain in the finger. After that any piece of iron, lock, bolt, or chain, no matter how strong it might be, would open at his bidding. Such a plant would be to the robbers not merely a source of amusement, but a valuable possession. So they entertained Jack and made him a soft bed where he could sleep soundly; but they told him that they would kill him if he didn't find the plant. All night long poor Jack dreamed of searching for the stalk of the herb. At the first gray dawn the robbers waked the boy and sent him to look for it.

Jack crept along on all fours, and while in this position, looking over the stalks of the plants in the meadow, he instantly saw one that glistened. That was the one he wanted! That was iron-wort!

Among the robbers was a one-eyed man, who had been locked up in the imperial dungeons and escaped loaded with fetters. The chains had afterward been filed off, but the handcuffs were made of a special kind of iron which fire did not melt and the file did not scratch. Jack touched the handcuff with the plant, and "klirr!" it fell rattling to the ground.

"Aha, may you be lucky, my son, you have freed me from an annoyance," said the delighted robber.

But when the captain took the plant from Jack's hand to remove the second handcuff, he labored in vain, the iron would not obey him. The witch had not told them that the herb would obey no one except the person appointed by fate to find it.

So the robbers saw that the iron-wort would do them no good, and perceiving this they became very angry and sharpened their knives and swords to kill Jack.

“Stop,” cried the one-eyed brigand. “You have said that you would not murder him if he could find the plant for us. He has found it. As men of our word, we must not kill him.”

And they did not, for robbers are men of their word; whether it is good or evil, what they have promised they perform. Yet, fearing Jack might give them up to justice, they found another way to get rid of him.

What did they do? They seized Jack and put him in an open cask, then closed it, drove iron bands around it, and went away. It was an evil deed.

So Jack went from good to bad, and from bad to worse, till at last we see him fastened up in a wine-cask. What was to become of him! just think, inside of a cask—that’s the end of every thing! Jack began to cry, howl, and shriek till the hungry wolves heard him and came running up, thinking they could devour him. But they could do nothing but lick their chops. Jack was shut up in the cask. As soon as he discovered that the wolves were near, he looked through the bung-hole and kept perfectly still.

The wolves then fell upon the remains of the ox and fought greedily over the bones. One, the largest and fiercest, seized a bone and crouched down with it close by Jack’s cask—Jack hardly dared to breathe.

Suddenly he saw the wolf’s hairy tail come through the bung-hole. Jack was terribly frightened. The tail came further and further in, and Jack grew more and more alarmed. At last the wolf shook itself and leaned further back, so that the whole tail entered and touched Jack’s nose. This was a bad business! Jack trembled with fear, and in his terror clutched the wolf’s tail with both hands and held on with all his might. The wolf was frightened, too, and took to flight, dragging the cask after it. You ought to have seen the wonder; helter-skelter went the brute, banging the cask against the trees, up hill and down dale. The wolf running, the cask following, Jack holding tight to the tail—that was worth seeing! Suddenly, helter-skelter the cask struck against a wall and burst open. The wolf ran on, but Jack found himself at home again, holding fast in both hands the wolf’s tail, which had been torn off.

So fared mother’s darling Jack. Whoever knows any thing more may continue his story.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com