Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Rabbit-Horse and the Turtle-Rider

John Howard Jewett

Jack-Rabbit had enjoyed his breakfast and was wondering what to do next to stay out of mischief.

Birds were holding a morning concert overhead. The tiny creatures under the leaves and grass were busy with their own affairs. The rocks and hummocks in the pasture seemed unusually dull.

The pasture reminded him of the lively time he'd run away from a few days before, when he played Lion while Snug and Monkey-Pug played Explorers. He lay down in the tall grass and laughed until his sides ached, chuckling to himself about how well his "wagglety ears" trick had worked while the explorers carried only wooden guns.

But somehow the joke wasn't quite so funny when he remembered the *bang!* of the real gun, and he began to feel lonesome and restless.

"I wonder why I'm so jumpy this morning," he said to himself. "It's nearly time for the turtles to crawl out into the sun. I'll gallop over to the pond. They're better company than none."

Bounding away at full speed, Jack soon reached the pond. He leaped to within a few feet of the log where the turtles were dozing and shouted:

"Wake up, sleepy! Or the nightmare will catch you in broad daylight!"

"Mercy, how you startled me!" said old Shellback Turtle, while the others tumbled off the log and hid in the water.

"You shouldn't be so nervous and flighty at your age," said Jack. "Why be afraid when you carry your house on your back to hide in?"

"I thought you were a hungry fox," said Shellback, "or one of those rowdy monkeys skipping school."

"Which do you like better, foxes or rowdy monkeys?"

"Neither, when they meddle with me or mine. I'd live in peace with them, and with the rest of you oversized creatures, if foxes weren't so hungry, and rowdy monkeys so fond of cruel sport, and *you* not so boisterous when you come calling at nap time."

"Oh, don't be so touchy," said Jack. "It's just my way of being cheerful. I was lonesome and wanted to talk to someone who has troubles of his own."

"You seem to enjoy making your share of trouble for others," muttered Shellback. "What were you stirring up those monkeys for, in the pasture the other day?"

"I didn't stir them up. *They* were stirring *me* up."

"You have legs. You should have left those hunters miles behind, instead of trying to be funny when they had a gun."

"They only had wooden guns when the circus began."

"I know, I know," said Shellback. "But you teased them until they were angry, and then you know what happened."

"Oh yes, the big one got shot in the leg. You'd have laughed your shell off to hear that monkey howl and spin round on one foot. I haven't enjoyed anything so much since I saw you chewing on the ear of that young fox who was trying to break your grandson's back with a rock," chuckled Jack.

"That was no laughing matter. I was defending my helpless little ones. You have queer notions of fun that hurt other people. What a tender-hearted playmate you'd have made if you'd been born a powerful tiger instead of a bragging, teasing Jack-Rabbit!"



"I didn't come over here to listen to a free lecture," said Jack sulkily. To change the subject he asked, "Where are all the little turtles this morning?"

"I'm here, waiting for you to play horse and rider with me!" piped a young turtle hiding in the underbrush.

"Come on out," said Jack, "and I'll give you a ride on my back while your old guardian thinks up another sermon or finishes his nap."

The eager little turtle scrambled over the rubbish to Jack's side and climbed onto his back as the tall rabbit crouched low.

"Don't fall off, and come back soon," cautioned Shellback, as the pair set off at an easy gallop across the fields.

Once they were out of sight of the pond, Jack picked up speed and ran as if greyhounds were chasing him. The frightened turtle clung to his bouncing seat and cried out:

"Not so fast, please! You'll shake me off!"

"Stop digging your sharp claws into me, and hold on by my fur!" shouted Jack. He raced on for a few miles over hill and dale, until he ran out of breath and halted in a clump of bushes. Then he began scolding the little turtle for scratching his back.

"You little rascal, you've drawn blood! Don't you know better than to stick those needle-toes into my tender shoulders?" Jack growled, as the turtle tumbled off into the grass.

"How could I help it when you ran so fast and bounced me so hard?" said the turtle. "I thought you were running from danger, not just playing horse and rider like the other day."

"I'll teach you to talk back," said Jack. "If you don't like my way, you can walk home whenever you're ready."

"You wouldn't leave me out here all alone, would you?" cried the frightened turtle. "It's so far, and I don't know the way!"

"You'll be as old as your grandfather by the time you get home, and that lecturing Shellback will be amazed at how you've grown," said Jack, so sternly that the little turtle began to cry as if his heart would break.

Jack backed off a short distance and sat down, as if he had no more to say. Then — *snap! click!* — something sounded right behind him. When he tried to jump away, his stubby tail was caught fast in a small steel trap, chained to a sapling.

Now it was Jack's turn to be frightened. If any monkeys had been there to see, they might have laughed, if they'd been so ill-bred and so unforgiving, to see Jack-Rabbit standing up on his hind legs, swinging a steel trap behind him as if to lengthen his stubby tail.

"Come here and see if you can help me," said Jack to the astonished little turtle. "Luckily the jaws have caught more fur than flesh. Maybe you can nibble around the edges and get me out of this mess before the trapper comes to see what kind of idiot rabbit he's caught."

Jack kept so cool that the little turtle never guessed how the fur pulled, or how much ache one small end of a short tail could hold when gripped by steel jaws. He set to work biting through the hairs around the edge of the trap.

At last only the very tip of the stump was still held in the jaws. With a sigh that ended in a groan, Jack said:

"Stand back and give me some slack on that chain while I make a jump for it. Something has got to give, tail or no tail."

"*Wow! That hurt!*" he shouted, as he leaped ten feet away, leaving a clump of fur and skin behind.

"Got off with tail to spare," said Jack, twisting his head to see how much was left of him. He took a quick glance at the part left in the trap, whose jaws seemed to be grinning at him.

He turned to the little turtle with a weak, sickly smile.

"I'll give you an easy ride home, sonny, if you promise never, ever to tell what happened to me here. I was only joking when I said I'd leave you to walk. It's just one of my cheerful ways, and you mustn't mind a thing like that, any more than I mind the keepsake I'm leaving for the smarty-smart trapper.

"Oh, what a good joke on *him*! How he'll scratch his head over that! Come on, 'Turt.' I'll feel better once I'm moving, but please grip the fur only this time. I've lost enough blood and fur for one day. Prepare to mount! *Mount!*"

Away went the rabbit-horse and turtle-rider. When they reached the edge of the pond, Jack said quietly:

"Give my love to your dear grandfather and tell him what a jolly ride you had. I think I won't disturb his nap this noon. I have a little matter that needs prompt attention. Mum's the word, you know. By-by!"

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