Name: _____ Date: _____

Cinder Jack

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1020 words

In Hungary, long ago, there lived a peasant who had three sons. The two older boys were strong and proud, and they had a habit of laughing at their youngest brother, who liked to sit in a corner of the kitchen among the warm ashes. Because he was always gray with ash, everyone called him Cinder Jack. His brothers thought he was lazy and good for nothing, and they never asked him to do anything useful at all.

One year the family's vineyard was in trouble. Every night something came and trampled the vines, and in the morning the grapes were scattered all over the ground. The father sent his eldest son to guard the vineyard. The young man took a cake with him, and he was happily eating it when a little frog hopped out of the bushes and asked for a crumb. "Get away from me, you ugly thing!" the boy shouted, and he waved it away with his hand.

The frog hopped away without a word, and the eldest son fell asleep in the sun. When he woke up, the vineyard was wrecked. The next day the father sent his second son, and the same thing happened. He refused the frog a crumb of his cake, he fell asleep, and the vineyard was trampled again. The father was furious. "What are we going to do?" he groaned. And in the corner by the fire, a quiet voice said, "Father, let me try."

His brothers burst out laughing. "You?" they cried. "You can't even stay out of the ashes!" But the father had no better idea, so he gave Jack a cake and told him to go. Cinder Jack walked to the vineyard, sat down on a stone, and broke his cake in half. Before long, the little frog came hopping out of the bushes, and Jack smiled at it. "You must be hungry," he said. "Here, have some of mine."

The frog ate the crumbs with delight. Then it said, "You are the first person who has been kind to me, and I will repay you." It gave Jack three slender rods, one made of copper, one of silver, and one of gold. "Tonight three horses will gallop out of the forest," said the frog. "One will be copper, one silver, and one gold. They will try to trample the vines, but if you touch each one with its own rod, it will become your friend. Call them whenever you need them, and they will come."

That night, as the frog had said, three horses came galloping out of the trees, their coats shining in the moonlight. Jack stepped out in front of them and touched each one with its rod. At once they stood still and bowed their heads, as gentle as lambs. The vineyard was safe, and in the autumn it produced the finest grapes anyone had seen. But Jack never told his father or his brothers how he had done it. He simply went back to his corner by the fire.

One Sunday, the king ordered his servants to set up a tall pole in the market square. A golden sprig of rosemary was fastened to the top, and he promised a wonderful prize to any rider who

could jump high enough to take it down. The prize was a vineyard of his own on the sunny side of the hill, and a place at the king's own table. Knights came from all over the land, and each of them tried and failed.

Then, suddenly, a rider appeared in gleaming copper armor, mounted on a copper horse. He galloped up to the pole, leaped, snatched the rosemary in one easy motion, and vanished before anyone could speak. The crowd gasped. When Jack's brothers came home and told the story, Jack said, "I saw it all, and I saw it better than you." "From where?" they asked. "From the top of the fence," said Jack. His brothers were annoyed, and the next morning they pulled the fence down.

The next Sunday, the king set up an even higher pole, with a golden apple at the top. Hundreds of riders tried and failed. Then a knight in silver armor, on a silver horse, galloped out of nowhere, leaped like a bird, and took the apple. Back at home, Jack calmly said that he had seen it even better this time, from the roof of the pigsty. His brothers were so angry that they tore the pigsty down.

On the third Sunday, the king hung a silk scarf, woven with gold thread, from the very top of the tallest pole yet. Nobody could reach it. Then a knight in golden armor, on a golden horse, flashed into the square, jumped higher than anyone ever had, caught the scarf, and was gone. Jack told his brothers that he had watched from the top of the house, and they were so jealous that they took the roof off the house, so he could not see anything.

Now the king announced that the knight who had won the three prizes must come forward with the rosemary, the apple and the scarf. But nobody came. So the king ordered every man in the kingdom to appear in the square, and still he could not find the knight. At last, someone remembered the boy in the ashes. Jack was brought forward, and the people whispered and laughed. "Surely not him," they said. But Jack bowed to the king and asked for a few moments.

He went behind a wall and called, and out came the golden horse and the golden armor. When he rode into the square, bells rang and cheers rose in the air. He put the golden rosemary, the apple and the scarf into the king's hands and raised his visor, and the people stared with their mouths open when they saw Cinder Jack. His brothers stood speechless. But Jack was good-natured, so he forgave them. He rebuilt their house and gave them presents, and he took his father to live with him in the vineyard on the sunny hill.

Questions

1. Why did the frog help Cinder Jack?

A. He gave it half of his cake
B. He caught it in a net
C. It was lost and he led it home

2. What did the three rods do?

A. They tamed the three horses
B. They opened the gate
C. They measured the vineyard

3. Why did Jack's brothers pull down the fence, the pigsty and the roof?

A. They wanted to build something new
B. They did not want him to see the contest
C. They needed the wood

4. What did Jack do after the brothers learned the truth?

A. He sent them away
B. He forgave them and helped them
C. He left the village

5. In this story, a peasant is

A. a person who works on the land
B. a person who rules a country
C. a kind of horse

Words to know

vineyard: field of grapevines
peasant: farm worker
trampled: crushed underfoot
visor: helmet face guard
slender: thin

Answer key: Cinder Jack

1. A. He gave it half of his cake
2. A. They tamed the three horses
3. B. They did not want him to see the contest
4. B. He forgave them and helped them
5. A. a person who works on the land