

Adventures with Jack

Stories to Make You Smile

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Dedication

I dedicate this book with love to three women
who have played important parts in my life:
my late sister, Freda Epstein Hecht,
my late wife, Ruth Gutman Epstein,
and my dear friend, Mary Sarin Covan.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the love and support of a number of my friends. I would like to thank the late Bob Griffiths for his contribution to this effort, and Nick Samadge, photographer, for his assistance with the photographs.

Also, thanks to Joyce Gioia for her help in editing and otherwise preparing this manuscript for publication, and to Carol Neuman, who had a hand in final preparation.

Disclaimer

At the age of 93, as of this writing, I hereby inform you that I did not keep a journal or a diary. All of the stories in this book were accessed from my memory that may not be perfect. Also, be advised that when memory failed, I took license to fill in the important names and dates.

Always Leave Them Laughing

One of the main interests in my life has always been animals. I enjoy reading about them, watching them on the screen, and visiting the various zoos around the country. During my teen years, a friend of my father got me a “helper job” in the Baltimore Zoo. I cleaned the cages, carried the feed buckets, and hosed down the animals.

One rule was strictly enforced and taught to each new zoo employee: if you go into a cage alone, always carry a long handled broom. Once you were inside the cage, the animals’ eyes focused on the broom and not you directly.

One day with feed bucket in hand, I entered the polar bears’ cage. There were two bear inhabitants—one huge male bear and a female bear that was almost as large. They didn’t intimidate me, but rest assured, I kept my broom directly in front of their view.

Always Leave Them Laughing

After placing the feed bucket on the ground, and still swinging the broom, I slowly backed towards the door. All of a sudden, the male bear sprang with one quick move and with one swipe sent the long handled broom to the top of the twenty foot ceiling.

However, instead of making me the next victim, the big bear sat back on his haunches and laughed like crazy. The female soon joined in. Bears *do* laugh, soundless, with their heads thrown back and tongues out. Suddenly, I felt like Bob Hope.

I emerged from this traumatic experience unscathed. To add icing on the cake, from that day on I was a welcome visitor to the polar bear cage—without my broom. Those crazy bears had a perverted sense of humor.

Take Me Out of the Ball Game

You never know when circumstances can quickly make you a hero. A case in point: I was fourteen years of age and attending Camp Kennebec in Maine. I played center field on the baseball team. Not well, but passably.

It was our big game. The next hitter up was anything but a heavy hitter, so I was playing close in on him in center field. As luck would have it, he connected with a fast ball and sent it screaming right at me. I lunged for the liner and misjudged it. The ball caught me squarely in the midsection. I felt as though I had been hit with a cannon ball. However, I did hang on to the ball.

Momentarily stunned, I staggered forward and fell on second base—just in time to double off a runner completing a double play. This play retired the other side, and we won the game.

Take Me Out of the Ball Game

That night at the banquet, I was given the award for the best play of the game. Frankly, I was looking for something more appropriate—like a shot of liniment for my aching stomach.

Monkey Business

One of the more pleasant jobs I had with the Baltimore Zoo was feeding the monkeys. There were about fifty of them in the enclosure and each day they awaited my arrival with their food.

We had a daily routine we followed to the letter. This routine mandated that one monkey, Jocko, by name, should always be fed first—then the others followed. Upon my arrival in the Monkey House, I would stand for a minute until Jocko appeared and climbed up my leg and body until he hugged me around the neck. Then he was fed and afterwards, the others would receive their dinner. This little rite played out daily for several months.

One day, however, Jocko didn't appear immediately at dinnertime. Another little fellow scooted up my body and hugged me around the neck, following Jocko's routine.

Just as I was about to feed him, I felt a tug and there was Jocko, in a fit of rage, climbing up my leg. Needless to say, the other monkey made a hasty retreat. I could tell Jocko was furious. When

Monkey Business

he reached my arms, he dug into the fleshy part with his fingernails and gave me quite a clawing. My arm started to bleed profusely. But before I could dash to the dispensary, Jocko jumped on my shoulder and gave me a big hug, as if to apologize. I could tell by the look in his eyes the rage had disappeared, and he was trying to tell me how sorry he was for hurting me.

Someone once said mankind evolved from the apes. After this little incident, I am convinced we share many similar emotions—one being jealousy. I learned not to “monkey around” with this emotion ever again.