

Peter and Jumper go to School

by Thornton W. Burgess

Hardly had jolly, round, red Mr. Sun thrown off his rosy blankets and begun his daily climb up in the blue, blue sky when Peter Rabbit and his cousin, Jumper the Hare, arrived at the place in the Green Forest where Peter had found Old Mother Nature the day before. She was waiting for them, ready to begin the first lesson.

“I am glad you are so prompt,” said she. “Promptness is one of the most important things in life. Now I am very, very busy these days, as you know, so we will begin school at once. Before either of you ask any questions, I am going to ask some myself. Peter, what do you look like? Where do you live? What do you eat? I want to find out just how much you really know about yourself.”

Peter scratched one ear with a long hind foot and hesitated as if he didn't know just how to begin. Old Mother Nature waited patiently. Finally Peter began rather timidly.

“Of course,” said he, “the only way I know how I look is by the way the other members of my family look, for I've never seen myself. I suppose in a way I look like all the rest of the Rabbit family. I have long hind legs and short front ones. I suppose this is so I can make long jumps when I am in a hurry.”

Old Mother Nature nodded, and Peter, taking courage, continued. “My hind legs are stout and strong, but my front ones are rather weak. I guess this is because I do not have a great deal of use for them, except for running. My coat is a sort of mixture of brown and gray, more brown in summer and more gray in winter. My ears are longer for my size than are those of most animals, but really not very long after all, not nearly as long for my size as my cousin Jumper's are for his size. My tail doesn't amount to much because it is so short that it is hardly worth calling a tail. It is so short I carry it straight up. It is white like a little bunch of cotton, and I suppose that that is why I am called a Cottontail Rabbit, though I have heard that some folks call me a Gray Rabbit and others a Bush Rabbit. I guess I'm called Bush Rabbit because I like bushy country in which to live.”

“I live in the dear Old Briar-patch and just love it. It is a mass of bushes and bramble-tangles and is the safest place I know of. I have cut little paths all through it just big enough for Mrs. Peter and myself. None of our enemies can get at us there, excepting Shadow the Weasel or Billy Mink. I have a sort of nest there where I spend my time when I am not running about. It is called a form and I sit in it a great deal.”

“In summer I eat clover, grass and other green things, and I just love to get over into Farmer Brown's garden. In winter I have to take what I can get, and this is mostly bark from young trees, buds and tender twigs of bushes, and any green plants I can find under the snow. I can run fast for a short distance, but only for a short distance. That is why I like thick brush and bramble-tangles. There I can dodge. I don't know any one who can beat me at dodging. If Reddy Fox or Bowser the Hound surprises me away from the dear Old Briar-patch I run for the nearest hollow log or hole in the ground. Sometimes in summer I dig a hole for myself, but not often. It is much easier to use a hole somebody else has dug. When I want to signal my friends I thump the ground with my hind feet. Jumper does the same thing. I forgot to say I don't like water.”

Old Mother Nature smiled. “You are thinking of that cousin of yours, the Marsh Rabbit who lives way

down in the Sunny South,” said she.

Peter looked a wee bit foolish and admitted that he was. Jumper the Hare was all interest at once. You see, he had never heard of this cousin.

“That was a very good account of yourself, Peter,” said Old Mother Nature. “Now take a look at your cousin, Jumper the Hare, and tell me how he differs from you.”

Peter took a long look at Jumper, and then, as before, scratched one ear with a long hind foot. “In the first place,” said he, “Jumper is considerably bigger than I. He has very long hind legs and his ears are very long. In summer he wears a brown coat, but in winter he is all white but the tips of those long ears, and those are black. Because his coat changes so, he is called the varying Hare. He likes the Green Forest where the trees grow close together, especially those places where there are a great many young trees. He's the biggest member of our family. I guess that's all I know about Cousin Jumper.”

“That is very good, Peter, as far as it goes,” said Old Mother Nature. “You have made only one mistake. Jumper is not the biggest of his family.”

Both Peter and Jumper opened their eyes very wide with surprise. “Also,” continued Old Mother Nature, “you forgot to mention the fact that Jumper never hides in hollow logs and holes in the ground as you do. Why don't you, Jumper?”

“I wouldn't feel safe there,” replied Jumper rather timidly. “I depend on my long legs for safety, and the way I can dodge around trees and bushes. I suppose Reddy Fox may be fast enough to catch me in the open, but he can't do it where I can dodge around trees and bushes. That is why I stick to the Green Forest. If you please, Mother Nature, what is this about a cousin who likes to swim?”

Old Mother Nature's eyes twinkled. “We'll get to that later on,” said she. “Now, each of you hold up a hind foot and tell me what difference you see.”

Peter and Jumper each held up a hind foot and each looked first at his own and then at the other's. “They look to me very much alike, only Jumper's is a lot longer and bigger than mine,” said Peter. Jumper nodded as if he agreed.

“What's the matter with your eyes?” demanded Old Mother Nature. “Don't you see that Jumper's foot is a great deal broader than yours, Peter, and that his toes are spread apart, while yours are close together?”

Peter and Jumper looked sheepish, for it was just as Old Mother Nature had said. Jumper's foot really was quite different from that of Peter. Peter's was narrow and slim.

“That is a very important difference,” declared Old Mother Nature. “Can you guess why I gave you those big feet, Jumper?”

Jumper slowly shook his head. “Not unless it was to make me different,” said he.

“I'm surprised,” said Old Mother Nature. “Yes, indeed, I'm surprised. You ought to know by this time that I never give anybody anything without a purpose. What happens to those big feet of yours in the winter, Jumper?”

“Nothing that I know of, excepting that the hair grows out long between my toes,” Jumper replied.

“Exactly,” snapped Old Mother Nature. “And when the hair does this you can travel over light snow without sinking in. It is just as if you had snowshoes. That is why you are often called a Snowshoe Rabbit. I gave you those big feet and make the hair grow out every winter because I know that you depend on your legs to get away from your enemies. You can run over the deep snow where your enemies break through. Peter, though he is small and lighter than you are, cannot go where you can. But Peter doesn't need to depend always on his legs to save his life. There is one thing more that I want you both to notice, and that is that you both have quite a lot of short hairs on the soles of you feet. That is where you differ from that cousin of yours down in the Sunny South. He has only a very few hairs on his feet. That is so he can swim better.”

“If you please, Mother Nature, why is that cousin of ours so fond of the water?” piped up Peter.

“Because,” replied Old Mother Nature, “he lives in marshy country where there is a great deal of water. He is very nearly the same size as you, Peter, and looks very much like you. But his legs are not quite so long, his ears are a little smaller, and his tail is brownish instead of white. He is a poor runner and so in time of danger he takes to the water. For that matter, he goes swimming for pleasure. The water is warm down there, and he dearly loves to paddle about in it. If a Fox chases him he simply plunges into the water and hides among the water plants with only his eyes and his nose out of water.”

“Does he make his home in the water like Jerry Muskrat?” asked Peter innocently.

Mother Nature smiled and shook her head. “Certainly not,” she replied. “His home is on the ground. His babies are born in a nest made just as Mrs. Peter makes her nest for your babies, and Mrs. Jumper makes a nest for Jumper's babies. It is made of grass and lined with soft fur which Mrs. Rabbit pulls from her own breast, and it is very carefully hidden. By the way, Peter how do your babies differ from the babies of your Cousin Jumper?”

Peter shook his head. “I don't know,” said he. “My babies don't have their eyes open when they are born, and they haven't any hair.”

Jumper pricked up his long ears. “What's that?” said he. “Why, my babies have their eyes open and have the dearest little fur coats!”

Old Mother Nature chuckled. “That is the difference,” said she. “I guess both of you have learned something.”

“You said a little while ago that Jumper isn't the biggest of our family,” said Peter. “If you please, who is?”

“There are several bigger than Jumper,” replied Old Mother Nature, and smiled as she saw the funny look of surprise on the faces of Peter and Jumper. “There is one way up the Frozen North and there are two cousins way out in the Great West. They are as much bigger than Jumper as Jumper is bigger than you, Peter. But I haven't time to tell you about them now. If you really want to learn about them, be here promptly at sun-up to-morrow morning. Hello! Here comes Reddy Fox, and he looks to me as if a good breakfast would not come amiss. Let me see what you have learned about taking care of yourselves.”

Peter and Jumper gave one startled look in the direction Mother Nature was pointing. Sure enough, there was Reddy Fox. Not far away was a hollow log. Peter wasted no time in getting to it. In fact, he left in such a hurry that he forgot to say good-bye to Old Mother Nature. But she didn't mind, for she quite understood Peter's feelings, and she laughed when she saw his funny little white tail disappear inside the hollow log. As for Jumper, he promptly took to his long legs and disappeared with great bounds, Reddy Fox racing after him.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "Peter and Jumper Go To School." *The Burgess Animal Book for Children*.
Electronic.