

Four Busy Little Miners

by Thornton W. Burgess

Scampering along on his way to school and thinking of nothing so uninteresting as watching his steps, Peter Rabbit stubbed his toes. Yes, sir, Peter stubbed his toes. With a little exclamation of impatience he turned to see what he had stumbled over. It was a little ridge where the surface of the ground had been raised a trifle since Peter had passed that way the day before.

Peter chuckled. "Now isn't that funny?" he demanded of no one at all, for he was quite alone. Then he answered himself. "It certainly is," said he. "Here I am on my way to learn something about Miner the Mole, and I trip over one of the queer little ridges he is forever making. It wasn't here yesterday, so that means that he is at work right around here now. Hello, I thought so!"

Peter had been looking along that little ridge and had discovered that it ended only a short distance from him. Now as he looked at it again, he saw the flat surface of the ground at the end of the ridge rise as if being pushed up from beneath, and that little ridge became just so much longer. Peter understood perfectly. Out of sight beneath the surface Miner the Mole was at work. He was digging a tunnel, and that ridge was simply the roof to that tunnel. It was so near the surface of the ground that Miner simply pushed up the loose soil as he bored his way along, and this made the little ridge over which Peter had stumbled.

Peter watched a few minutes, then turned and scampered, lipperty-lipperty-lip, for the Green Forest. He arrived at school quite out of breath, the last one. Old Mother Nature was about to chide him for being late, but noticing his excitement, she changed her mind.

"Well, Peter," said she. "What is it now? Did you have a narrow escape on your way here?" Peter shook his head. "No," he replied. "No, I didn't have a narrow escape, but I discovered something."

Happy Jack Squirrel snickered. "Peter is always discovering something," said he. "He is a great little discoverer. Probably he has just found out that the only way to get anywhere on time is to start soon enough."

"No such thing!" declared Peter indignantly. "You—"

"Never mind him, Peter," interrupted Old Mother Nature soothingly. "What was it you discovered?"

"That the very one we are to learn about is only a little way from here this very minute. Miner the Mole is at work on the Green Meadow; close to the edge of the Green Forest," cried Peter eagerly. "I thought perhaps you would want to—"

"Have this morning's lesson right there where we can at least see his works if not himself," interrupted Old Mother Nature again. "That is fine, Peter. We will go over there at once. It is always better to see things than to merely hear about them."

So Peter led the way to where he had stumbled over that little ridge on his way to school. It was longer than when he had left it, but even as the others crowded about to look, the earth was pushed up and it grew in length. Old Mother Nature stooped and made a little hole in that ridge. Then she put her lips

close to it and commanded Miner to come out. She spoke softly, pleasantly, but in a way that left no doubt that she expected to be obeyed.

She was. Almost at once a queer, long, sharp nose was poked out of the little hole she had made, and a squeaky voice asked fretfully, "Do I have to come way out?"

"You certainly do," replied Old Mother Nature. "I want some of your friends and neighbors to get a good look at you, and they certainly can't do that with only that sharp nose of yours to be seen. Now scramble out here. No one will hurt you. I will keep you only a few minutes. Then you can go back to your everlasting digging. Out with you, now!"

While the others gathered in a little circle close about that hole there scrambled into view one of the queerest little fellows in all the Great World. Few of them had ever seen him close to before. He was a stout little fellow with the softest, thickest, gray coat imaginable. He was about six inches long and had a funny, short, pinkish-white, naked tail that at once reminded Peter of an Anglemole.

His head seemed to be set directly on his shoulders, so that there was no neck worth mentioning. His nose was long and sharp and extended far beyond his mouth. Neither ears nor eyes were to be seen.

Striped Chipmunk at once wanted to know how Miner could see. "He doesn't see as you do," replied Old Mother Nature. "He has very small eyes, tiny things, which you might find if you should part the fur around them, but they are of use only to distinguish light from darkness. Miner hasn't the least idea what any of you look like. You see, he spends his life under ground and of course has no use for eyes there. They would be a nuisance, for the dirt would be continually getting in them if they were any larger than they are or were not protected as they are. If you should feel of Miner's nose you would find it hard. That is because he uses it to bore with in the earth. Just notice those hands of his."

At once everybody looked at Miner's hands. No one ever had seen such hands before. The arms were short but looked very strong. The hands also were rather short, but what they lacked in length they made up in width and they were armed with long, stout claws. But the queer thing about them was the way he held them. He held them turned out. His hind feet were not much different from the hind feet of the Mouse family.

Miner was plainly uncomfortable. He wriggled about uneasily and it was very clear that he was there only because Old Mother Nature had commanded him to be there, and that the one thing he wanted most was to get back into his beloved ground. Old Mother Nature saw this and took pity on him. She picked him up and placed him on the ground where there was no opening near.

"Now, Miner," said she, "your friends and neighbors have had a good look at you, and I know just how uncomfortable you feel. There is but one thing more I'll ask of you. It is that you will show us how you can dig. Johnny Chuck thinks he is a pretty good digger. Just show him what you can do in that line."

Miner didn't wait to be told twice. The instant Old Mother Nature stopped speaking he began to push and bore into the earth with his sharp nose. One of those great, spadelike hands was slipped up past his face and the claws driven in beside his nose. Then it was swept back and the loosened earth with it. The other hand was used in the same way. It was quite plain to everybody why they were turned out in the way they were. There was nothing slow about the way Miner used that boring nose and those shoveling hands. Peter Rabbit had hardly time for half a dozen long breaths before Miner the Mole had disappeared.

“Some digging!” exclaimed Peter.

“Never again as long as I live will I boast of my digging,” declared Johnny Chuck admiringly. From the point where Miner had entered the ground a little ridge was being pushed up, and they watched it grow surprisingly fast as the little worker under the sod pushed his tunnel along in the direction of his old tunnels. It was clear that he was in a hurry to get back where he could work in peace.

“What a queer life,” exclaimed Happy Jack Squirrel. “He can't have much fun. I should think it would be awful living in the dark that way all the time.”

“You forget that he cannot see as you can, and so prefers the dark,” replied Old Mother Nature. “As for fun, he gets that in his work. He is called Miner because he lives in the ground and is always tunneling.”

“What does he eat, the roots of plants?” asked Jumper the Hare.

Old Mother Nature shook her head. “A lot of people think that,” said she, “and often Miner is charged with destroying growing crops, eating seed corn, etc. That is because his tunnels are found running along the rows of plants. The fact is Miner has simply been hunting for grubs and worms around the roots of those plants. He hasn't touched the plants at all. I suspect that Danny Meadow Mouse or one of his cousins could explain who ate the seed corn and the young plants. They are rather fond of using Miner's tunnels when he isn't about.”

Danny hung his head and looked guilty, but didn't say anything. “The only harm Miner does is sometimes to tunnel so close to garden plants that he lets air in around the tender roots and they dry out,” continued Old Mother Nature. “His food consists almost wholly of worms, grubs and insects, and he has to have a great many to keep him alive. That is why he is so active. Those tunnels of his which seem to be without any plan are made in his search for food. He is especially fond of Angleworms.

“As a matter of fact, he is a useful little fellow. The only time he becomes a nuisance to man is when he makes his little ridges across smooth lawns. Even then he pays for the trouble by destroying the grubs in the grass roots, grubs that in their turn would destroy the grass. When you see his ridges you may know that his food is close to the surface. When in dry or cold weather the worms go deep in the ground, Miner follows and then there is no trace of his tunnels on the surface.

“Night and day are all the same to him. He works and sleeps when he chooses. In winter he tunnels below the frost line. You all noticed how dense his fur is. That is so the sand cannot work down in it. His home is a snug nest of grass or leaves in a little chamber under the ground in which several tunnels offer easy means of escape in case of sudden danger.”

“Has Miner any near relatives?” asked Peter Rabbit.

“Several,” replied Old Mother Nature. “All are much alike in habits. One who lives a little farther north is called Brewer's Mole or the Hairytailed Mole. His tail is a little longer than Miner's and is covered with fine hair. The largest and handsomest member of the family is the Oregon Mole of the Northwest. His coat is very dark and his fur extremely fine. His ways are much the same as those of Miner whom you have just met, excepting that when he is tunneling deep in the ground he pushes the earth to the surface after the manner of Grubby Gopher, and his mounds become a nuisance to farmers. When he is

tunneling just under the surface he makes ridges exactly like these of his eastern cousin.

“But the oddest member of the Mole family is the Star-nosed Mole. He looks much like Miner with the exception of his nose and tail. His nose has a fringe of little fleshy points, twenty-two of them, like a many-pointed star. From this he gets his name. His tail is a little longer than Miner's and is hairy. During the late fall and winter this becomes much enlarged.

“This funny little fellow with the star-like nose is especially fond of moist places, swamps, damp meadows, and the banks of streams. He is not at all afraid of the water and is a good swimmer. Sometimes he may be seen swimming under the ice in winter. He is seldom found where the earth is dry. For that matter, none of the family are found in those sections where there are long, dry periods and the earth becomes baked and hard.

“The fur of Miner and his cousins will lay in either direction, which keeps it smooth no matter whether the wearer is going forward or backward. Otherwise it would be badly mussed up most of the time. Altogether these little underground workers are most interesting little people when you know them. But that is something few people have a chance to do.

“Now just remember that the Shrews and the Moles belong to the order of Insectivora, meaning eaters of insects, and are the only two families in that order. And don't despise either of them, for they do a great deal of good in the Great World, more than some right here whom I might name, but will not. School is dismissed.”

Source:

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