

## Danny Meadow Mouse Learns Why His Tail is Short

by Thornton W. Burgess

Danny Meadow Mouse sat in his doorway and looked down the Lone Little Path across the Green Meadows. Way, way over near the Smiling Pool he could see Old Mother West Wind's Children, the Merry Little Breezes, at play. Sammy Jay was sitting on a fence post. He pretended to be taking a sun bath, but really he was planning mischief. You never see Sammy Jay that he isn't in mischief or planning it.

Reddy Fox had trotted past an hour before in a great hurry. Up on the hill Danny Meadow Mouse could just see Jimmy Skunk pulling over every old stick and stone he could find, no matter whose house it might be, and excusing himself because he was hungry and was looking for beetles.

Jolly, round, red Mr. Sun was playing at hide and seek behind some fleecy white clouds. All the birds were singing and singing, and the world was happy—all but Danny Meadow Mouse.

No, Danny Meadow Mouse was not happy. Indeed, he was very far from happy, and all because his tail was short.

By and by up came old Mr. Toad. It was a warm day and Mr. Toad was very hot and very, very thirsty. He stopped to rest beside the house of Danny Meadow Mouse.

"Good morning, Danny Meadow Mouse," said old Mr. Toad, "it's a fine morning."

"Morning," said Danny Meadow Mouse, grumpily.

"I hope your health is good this morning," continued old Mr. Toad, just as if he hadn't noticed how short and cross Danny Meadow Mouse had answered.

Now old Mr. Toad is very ugly to look upon, but the ugliness is all in his looks. He has the sunniest of hearts and always he is looking for a chance to help someone.

"Danny Meadow Mouse," said old Mr. Toad, "you make me think of your grandfather a thousand times removed. You do indeed. You look just as he did when he lost the half of his tail and realized that he never, never could get it back again."

Danny Meadow Mouse sat up suddenly.

"What are you talking about, old Mr. Toad? What are you talking about?" he asked. "Did my grandfather a thousand times removed lose the half of his tail, and was it shorter than than mine is now? Was it, old Mr. Toad? And how did he come to lose the half of it?"

Old Mr. Toad laughed a funny silent laugh. "It's a long story," said old Mr. Toad, "and I'm afraid I can't tell it. Go down to the Smiling Pool and ask Great-Grandfather Frog, who is my first cousin, how it happened your grandfather a thousand times removed lost the half of his tail. But before you go catch three fat, foolish, green flies and take them with you as a present to Grandfather Frog."

Danny Meadow Mouse could hardly wait for old Mr. Toad to stop speaking. In fact, he was in such a hurry that he almost forgot his manners. Not quite, however, for he shouted "Thank you, Mr. Toad, thank you!" over his shoulder as he rushed off down the Lone Little Path.

You see his short tail had always been a matter of mortification to Danny Meadow Mouse. All his cousins in the Mouse family and the Rat family have long, smooth, tapering tails, and they have always been a source of envy to Danny Meadow Mouse. He had felt his queer short tail to be a sort of disgrace. So when he would meet one of his cousins dancing down the Lone Little Path, with his long, slim, tapering tail behind him, Danny Meadow Mouse would slip out of sight under the long grass, he was so ashamed of his own little tail. It looked so mean and small! He had wondered and wondered if the Meadow Mice had always had short tails. He used to ask everyone who came his way if they had ever seen a Meadow Mouse with a long tail, but he had never found any one who had.

"Perhaps," thought Danny Meadow Mouse as he hurried down the Lone Little Path, "perhaps Grandfather Frog, who is very wise, will know why my tail is short."

So he hurried this way and he hurried that way over the Green Meadows in search of fat, foolish, green flies. And when he had caught three, he caught one more for good measure. Then he started for the Smiling Pool as fast as his short legs would take him.

When finally he reached the edge of the Smiling Pool he was quite out of breath. There sat Great-Grandfather Frog on his big, green lily pad. He was blinking his great goggle eyes at jolly, round, red Mr. Sun.

"Oh, Grandfather Frog," said Danny Meadow Mouse in a very small voice, for you know he was quite out of breath with running, "Oh, Grandfather Frog, I've brought you four fat, foolish, green flies."

Grandfather Frog put a hand behind an ear and listened. "Did I hear someone say 'foolish, green flies?'" asked Grandfather Frog.

"Yes, Grandfather Frog, here they are," said Danny Meadow Mouse, still in a very small voice. Then he gave Grandfather Frog the four fat, foolish, green flies.

"What is it that you want me to do for you, Danny Meadow Mouse?" asked Grandfather Frog as he smacked his lips, for he knew that Danny Meadow Mouse must want something to bring him four fat, foolish, green flies.

"If you please," said Danny Meadow Mouse, very politely, "if you please, Grandfather Frog, old Mr. Toad told me that you could tell me how Grandfather Meadow Mouse a thousand times removed lost half of his tail. Will you, Grandfather Frog—will you?"

"Chug-a-rum," said Grandfather Frog. "My cousin, Mr. Toad, talks too much."

But he settled himself comfortably on the big lily pad, and this is what he told Danny Meadow Mouse:

"Once upon a time, when the world was young, Mr. Meadow Mouse, your grandfather a thousand times removed, was a very fine gentleman. He took a great deal of pride in his appearance, did Mr. Meadow Mouse, and they used to say on the Green Meadows that he spent an hour, a full hour, every day combing his whiskers and brushing his coat.

"Anyway, he was very fine to look upon, was Mr. Meadow Mouse, and not the least attractive thing about him was his beautiful, long, slim tail, of which he was very proud.

"Now about this time there was a great deal of trouble on the Green Meadows and in the Green Forest, for some one was stealing—yes, stealing! Mr. Rabbit complained first. To be sure, Mr. Rabbit was lazy and his cabbage patch had grown little more than weeds while he had been minding other folks' affairs rather than his own, but, then, that was no reason why he should lose half of the little which he did raise. And that is just what he said had happened.

"No one really believed what Mr. Rabbit said, for he had such a bad name for telling things which were not so that when he did tell the truth no one could be quite sure of it.

"So no one paid much heed to what Mr. Rabbit said until Happy Jack Squirrel one day went to his snug little hollow in the big chestnut tree where he stores his nuts and discovered half had been stolen. Then Striped Chipmunk lost the greater part of his winter store of corn. A fat trout was stolen from Billy Mink.

"It was a terrible time, for every one suspected every one else, and no one on the Green Meadows was happy.

"One evening Mr. Meadow Mouse went for a stroll along the Crooked Little Path up the hill. It was dark, very dark indeed. But just as he passed Striped Chipmunk's granary, the place where he stores his supply of corn and acorns for the winter, Mr. Meadow Mouse met his cousin, Mr. Wharf Rat. Now Mr. Wharf Rat was very big and strong and Mr. Meadow Mouse had for a long time looked up to and admired him.

"'Good evening, Cousin Meadow Mouse,' said Mr. Wharf Rat, swinging a bag down from his shoulder. 'Will you do a favor for me?'

"Now Mr. Meadow Mouse felt very much flattered, and as he was a very obliging fellow anyway, he promptly said he would.

"'All right,' said Mr. Wharf Rat. 'I'm going to get you to tote this bag down the Crooked Little Path to the hollow chestnut tree. I've got an errand back on top of the hill.'

"So Mr. Meadow Mouse picked up the bag, which was very heavy, and swung it over his shoulder. Then he started down the Crooked Little Path. Half way down he met Striped Chipmunk.

"'Good evening, Mr. Meadow Mouse,' said Striped Chipmunk. 'What are you toting in the bag across your shoulder?'

"Now, of course, Mr. Meadow Mouse didn't know what was in the bag and he didn't like to admit that he was working for another, for he was very proud, was Mr. Meadow Mouse.

"So he said: 'Just a planting of potatoes I begged from Jimmy Skunk, just a planting of potatoes, Striped Chipmunk.'

"Now no one had ever suspected Mr. Meadow Mouse of stealing—no indeed! Striped Chipmunk would

have gone his way and thought no more about it, had it not happened that there was a hole in the bag and from it something dropped at his feet. Striped Chipmunk picked it up and it *wasn't* a potato. It was a fat acorn. Striped Chipmunk said nothing but slipped it into his pocket.

"Good night,' said Mr. Meadow Mouse, once more shouldering the bag.

"Good night,' said Striped Chipmunk.

"No sooner had Mr. Meadow Mouse disappeared in the darkness down the Crooked Little Path than Striped Chipmunk hurried to his granary. Some one had been there and stolen all his acorns!

"Then Striped Chipmunk ran to the house of his cousin, Happy Jack Squirrel, and told him how the acorns had been stolen from his granary and how he had met Mr. Meadow Mouse with a bag over his shoulder and how Mr. Meadow Mouse had said that he was toting home a planting of potatoes he had begged from Jimmy Skunk. 'And this,' said Striped Chipmunk, holding out the fat acorn, 'is what fell out of the bag.'

"Then Striped Chipmunk and Happy Jack Squirrel hurried over to Jimmy Skunk's house, and, just as they expected, they found that Mr. Meadow Mouse had not begged a planting of potatoes of Jimmy Skunk.

"So Striped Chipmunk and Happy Jack Squirrel and Jimmy Skunk hurried over to Mr. Rabbit's and told him all about Mr. Meadow Mouse and the bag of potatoes that dropped acorns. Mr. Rabbit looked very grave, very grave indeed. Then Striped Chipmunk and Happy Jack Squirrel and Jimmy Skunk and Mr. Rabbit started to tell Mr. Coon, who was cousin to old King Bear.

"On the way they met Hooty the Owl, and because he could fly softly and quickly, they sent Hooty the Owl to tell all the meadow people who were awake to come to the hollow chestnut tree. So Hooty the Owl flew away to tell all the little meadow people who were awake to meet at the hollow chestnut tree.

"When they reached the hollow chestnut tree whom should they find there but Mr. Meadow Mouse fast asleep beside the bag he had brought for Mr. Wharf Rat, who had wisely stayed away.

"Very softly Striped Chipmunk stole up and opened the bag. Out fell his store of fat acorns. Then they waked Mr. Meadow Mouse and marched him off to old Mother Nature, where they charged him with being a thief.

"Old Mother Nature listened to all they had to say. She saw the bag of acorns and she heard how Mr. Meadow Mouse had said that he had a planting of potatoes. Then she asked him if he had stolen the acorns. Yes, Sir, she asked him right out if he had stolen the acorns.

"Of course Mr. Meadow Mouse said that he had not stolen the acorns.

"Then where did you get the bag of acorns?" asked old Mother Nature.

"When she asked this, Mr. Wharf Rat, who was sitting in the crowd of meadow people, got up and softly tiptoed away when he thought no one was looking. But old Mother Nature saw him. You can't fool old Mother Nature. No, Sir, you can't fool old Mother Nature, and it's of no use to try.

"Mr. Meadow Mouse didn't know what to say. He knew now that Mr. Wharf Rat must be the thief, but Mr. Wharf Rat was his cousin, and he had always looked up to him as a very fine gentleman. He couldn't tell the world that Mr. Wharf Rat was a thief. So Mr. Meadow Mouse said nothing.

"Three times old Mother Nature asked Mr. Meadow Mouse where he got the bag of acorns, and each time Mr. Meadow Mouse said nothing.

"'Mr. Meadow Mouse,' said old Mother Nature, and her voice was very stern, 'I know that you did not steal the acorns of Striped Chipmunk. I know that you did not even guess that there were stolen acorns in that bag. Everyone else thinks that you are the thief who caused so much trouble on the Green Meadows and in the Green Forest. But I know who the real thief is and he is stealing away as fast as he can go down the Lone Little Path this very minute.'

"All of the little meadow people and forest folks turned to look down the Lone Little Path, but it was so dark none could see, none but Hooty the Owl, whose eyes are made to see in the dark.

"'I see him!' cried Hooty the Owl. 'It's Mr. Wharf Rat!'

"'Yes,' said old Mother Nature, 'it's Mr. Wharf Rat—he is the thief. And this shall be his punishment: Always hereafter he will be driven out wherever he is found. He shall no longer live in the Green Meadows or the Green Forest. Everyone will turn their backs upon him. He will live on what others throw away. He will live in filth and there will be no one to say a good word for him. He will become an outcast instead of a fine gentleman.'

"'And you, Mr. Meadow Mouse, in order that you may remember always to avoid bad company, and that while it is a splendid thing to be loyal to your friends and not to tell tales, it is also a very, very wrong thing to shield those who have done wrong when by so doing you simply help them to keep on doing wrong—you shall no longer have the splendid long tail of which you are so proud, but it shall be short and stubby.'

"Even while old Mother Nature was speaking, Mr. Meadow Mouse felt his tail grow shorter and shorter, and when she had finished he had just a little mean stub of a tail.

"Of course he felt terribly. And while Striped Chipmunk hurried to tell him how sorry he felt, and while all the other little meadow people also hurried to tell him how sorry they felt, he could not be comforted. So he slipped away as quickly as he could, and because he was so ashamed he crept along underneath the long grass that no one should see his short tail. And ever since that long ago time when the world was young," concluded Grandfather Frog, "the Meadow Mice have had short tails and have always scurried along under cover of the long grass where no one will see them. And the Wharf Rats have never again lived in the Green Meadows or in the Green Forest, but have lived on filth and garbage around the homes of men, with every man's hand against them."

"Thank you, Grandfather Frog," said Danny Meadow Mouse, very soberly. "Now I understand why my tail is short and I shall not forget."

"But it isn't your fault at all, Danny Meadow Mouse," cried the Merry Little Breezes, who had been listening, "and we love you just as much as if your tail was long!"

Then they played tag with him all the way up the Lone Little Path to his house, till Danny Meadow

Mouse quite forgot that he had wished that his tail was long.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "Danny Meadow Mouse Learns Why His Tail is Short." *Mother West Wind's Children*. New York: Grossett & Dunlap Publishers. 1911. Electronic.