

Where Grandfather Frog Got His Big Mouth

by Thornton W. Burgess

Everybody knows that Grandfather Frog has a big mouth. Of course! It wouldn't be possible to look him straight in the face and not know that he has a big mouth. In fact, about all you see when you look Grandfather Frog full in the face are his great big mouth and two great big goggly eyes. He seems then to be all mouth and eyes.

Anyway, that is what Peter Rabbit says. Peter never will forget the first time he saw Grandfather Frog. Peter was very young then. He had run away from home to see the Great World, and in the course of his wanderings he came to the Smiling Pool. Never before had he seen so much water. The most water he had ever seen before was a little puddle in the Lone Little Path. So when Peter, who was only half grown then, hopped out on the bank of the Smiling Pool and saw it dimpling and smiling in the sunshine, he thought it the most wonderful thing he ever had seen. The truth is that in those days Peter was in the habit of thinking everything he saw for the first time the most wonderful thing yet, and as he was continually seeing new things, and as his eyes always nearly popped out of his head whenever he saw something new, it is a wonder that he didn't become pop-eyed.

Peter stared and stared at the Smiling Pool, and little by little he began to see other things. First he noticed the bulrushes growing with their feet in the water. They looked to him like giant grass, and he began to be a little fearful lest this should prove to be a sort of magic place—a place of giants. Then he noticed the lily-pads, and he stared very hard at these. They looked like growing things, and yet they seemed to be floating right on top of the water. It wasn't until a Merry Little Breeze came along and turned the edge of one up so that Peter saw the long stem running down in the water out of sight, that he was able to understand how those lily-pads could be growing there. He was still staring at those lily-pads when a great deep voice said:

"Chug-a-rum! Chug-a-rum! Don't you know it isn't polite to stare at people?"

That voice was so unexpected and so deep that Peter was startled. He jumped, started to run, then stopped. He wanted to run, but curiosity wouldn't let him. He simply couldn't run away until he had found out where that voice came from and to whom it belonged. It seemed to Peter that it had come from right out of the Smiling Pool, but look as he would, he couldn't see any one there.

"If you please," said Peter timidly, "I'm not staring at anybody." All the time he was staring down into the Smiling Pool with eyes fairly popping out of his head.

"Chug-a-rum! Have a care, young fellow! Have a care how you talk to your elders. Do you mean to be impudent enough to tell me to my face that I am not anybody?" The voice was deeper and gruffer than ever, and it made Peter more uncomfortable than ever.

"Oh, no, Sir! No, indeed!" exclaimed Peter. "I don't mean anything of the kind. I—I—well, if you please, Sir, I don't see you at all, so how can I be staring at you? I'm sure from the sound of your voice that you must be somebody very important. Please excuse me for seeming to stare. I was just looking for you, that is all."

A little movement in the water close to a big green lily-pad caught Peter's eyes, and then out on the big

green lily-pad climbed Grandfather Frog. If Peter had stared before he doubly stared now, eyes and mouth wide open. Grandfather Frog was looking his very best in his handsome green coat and white-and-yellow waistcoat. But Peter had hardly noticed these at all.

"Why, you're all mouth!" he exclaimed, and then looked very much ashamed of his impoliteness.

Grandfather Frog's great goggly eyes twinkled. He knew that Peter was very young and innocent and just starting out in the Great World. He knew that Peter didn't intend to be impolite.

"Not quite," said he good-naturedly. "Not quite all mouth, though I must admit that it is of good size. The fact is, I wouldn't have it a bit smaller if I could. If it were any smaller, I should miss many a good meal, and if I were forced to do that, I am afraid I should be very ill-tempered indeed. The truth is, I am very proud of my big mouth. I don't know of any one who has a bigger one for their size."

He opened his mouth wide, and it seemed to Peter that Grandfather Frog's whole head simply split in halves. He hadn't supposed anybody in all the Great World possessed such a mouth.

"Where did you get it?" gasped Peter, and then felt that he had asked a very foolish question.

Grandfather Frog chuckled. "I got it from my father, and he got his from his father, and so on, way back to the days when the world was young and the Frogs ruled the world," said he. "Would you like to hear about it?"

"I'd love to!" cried Peter. So he settled himself comfortably on the bank of the Smiling Pool for the first of many, many stories he was to hear from Grandfather Frog.

"Chug-a-rum!" began Grandfather Frog. You know he always begins a story that way. "Chug-a-rum! Once upon a time the Great World was mostly water, and most of the people lived in the water. It was in those days that my great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather lived. Those were happy days for the Frogs. Yes, indeed, those were happy days for the Frogs. Of course they had enemies, but those enemies were all in the water. They didn't have to be watching out for danger from the air and from the land, as I do now. There was plenty to eat and little to do, and the Frog tribe increased very fast. In fact, the Frogs increased so fast that after a while there wasn't plenty to eat. That is, there wasn't plenty of the kind of food they had been used to, which was mostly water plants, and water bugs and such things.

"Of course there were many fish, and these also increased very fast, and the big fish ate the Frogs whenever they could catch them, just as they do to this day. The big fish also ate the little fish, and it wasn't long before the Frogs and the little fish took to living where the water was not deep enough for the big fish to swim, and this made it all the harder to get enough to eat. The mouths of the Frogs in those days were not big. In fact, they were quite small. You see, living on the kind of food they did, they had no need of big mouths.

"One day as a Great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather Frog sat with just his head out of water, wondering what it would seem like to have his stomach really filled, a school of little fish came swimming about him, and it popped into his head that if little fish were good for big fish to eat, they might be good for a Frog to eat. So he caught the first one that came within reach, and he found it was good to eat. He liked it so well that after that he caught fish whenever he could. Of course he swallowed them whole. He had to, because he had no chewing or biting teeth.

"Now the Frogs always have been famous for their appetites, and Great-grandfather Frog found that it took a great many of these teeny weeny fish to make a comfortable meal. He was thinking of this one day when a larger fish came within reach, and almost without realizing what he was doing Great-grandfather snapped at and caught him. He caught the fish by the tail and at once began to swallow it, which, of course, was no way to swallow a fish. But Great-grandfather Frog had much to learn in those days, and so he tried to swallow that fish tail first instead of head first. He got the tail down and the smallest part of the body, and then that fish stuck. Yes, Sir, that fish stuck. The fact was, Great-grandfather Frog's mouth wasn't wide enough. It was bad enough not to be able to swallow all of that fish, but what was worse was the discovery that he couldn't get up again what he had swallowed. That fish was stuck! It would go neither down nor up.

"Poor Great-grandfather Frog was in a terrible fix. Big tears rolled down his cheeks. He choked and choked and choked, until it looked very much as if he might choke to death. Just in time, in the very nick of time, who should come along but Old Mother Nature. She saw right away what the trouble was, and she pulled out the fish. Then she asked how that fish had happened to be in such a place as Great-grandfather Frog's mouth. When he could get his breath, he told her all about it—how food had been getting scarce and how he had discovered that fish were good to eat, and how he had make a mistake in catching a fish too big for his mouth. Old Mother Nature looked thoughtful. She saw the great numbers of young fish. Suddenly she reached over and put a finger in Great-grandfather Frog's mouth and stretched it sideways. Then she did the same thing to the other corner. Great-grandfather Frog's mouth was three times as big as it had been before.

"'Now,' said she, 'I don't believe you'll have any more trouble, and I'm going to do the same thing for all the other Frogs.'

"She did that very day, and from then on the Frogs no longer had any trouble in getting plenty to eat. So that is where I got my big mouth, and I tell you right now I wouldn't trade it for anything anybody else has got," concluded Grandfather Frog, as he snapped up a foolish green fly who came too near.

"I think it is splendid, perfectly splendid," cried Peter. "I wish I had one just like it." And then he wondered why Grandfather Frog laughed so hard.

Source:

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