

The Runaway Water Spiders

by Clara Dillingham Pierson

When the little Water Spiders first opened their eyes, and this was as soon as they were hatched, they found themselves in a cosy home of one room which their mother had built under the water. This room had no window and only one door. There was no floor at all. When Father Stickleback had asked Mrs. Spider why she did not make a floor, she had looked at him in great surprise and said, "Why, if I had built one, I should have no place to go in and out." She really thought him quite stupid not to think of that. It often happens, you know, that really clever people think each other stupid, just because they live in different ways. Afterward, Mrs. Water Spider saw Father Stickleback's nest, and understood why he asked that question.

When her home was done, it was half as large as a big acorn and a charming place for Water Spider babies. The side walls and the rounding ceiling were all of the finest Spider silk, and the bottom was just one round doorway. The house was built under the water and fastened down by tiny ropes of Spider silk which were tied to the stems of pond plants. Mrs. Water Spider looked at it with a happy smile. "Next I must fill it with air," said she, "and then it will be ready. I am out of breath now."

She crept up the stem of the nearest plant and sat in the air for a few minutes, eating her lunch and resting. Next she walked down the stem until just the end of her body was in the air. She stood so, with her head down, then gave a little jerk and dove to her home. As she jerked, she crossed her hindlegs and caught a small bubble of air between them and her body. When she reached her home, she went quickly in the open doorway and let go of her bubble. It did not fall downward to the floor, as bubbles do in most houses, and there were two reasons for this. In the first place, there was no floor. In the second place, air always falls upward in the water. This fell up until it reached the rounded ceiling and had to stop. Just as it fell, a drop of water went out through the open doorway. The home had been full of water, you know, but now that Mrs. Spider had begun to bring in air something had to be moved to make a place for it.

She brought down thirteen more bubbles of air and then the house was filled with it. On the lower side of the open doorway there was water and on the upper side was air, and each stayed where it should. When Mrs. Spider came into her house, she always had some air caught in the hairs which covered her body, even when she did not bring a bubble of it in her hindlegs. She had to have plenty of it in her home to keep her from drowning, for she could not breathe water like a fish. "Side doors may be all right for Sticklebacks," said she, "for they do not need air, but I must have bottom doors, and I will have them too!"

After she had laid her eggs, she had some days in which to rest and visit with the Water-Boatmen who lived near. They were great friends. Belostoma used to ask the Water-Boatmen, who were his cousins, why they were so neighborly with the Water Spiders. "I don't like to see you so much with eight-legged people," he said. "They are not our kind." Belostoma was very proud of his family.

"We know that they have rather too many legs to look well," said Mrs. Water-Boatman, "but they are pleasant, and we are interested in the same things. You know we both carry air about with us in the water, and so few of our neighbors seem to care anything for it." She was a sensible little person and knew that people who are really fond of their friends do not care how many legs they have. She carried her air under her wings, but there were other Water-Boatmen, near relatives, who spread theirs

over their whole bodies, and looked very silvery and beautiful when they were under water.

One day, when Mrs. Water Spider was sitting on a lily-pad and talking with her friends, a Water-Boatman rose quickly from the bottom of the pond. As soon as he got right side up (and that means as soon as he got to floating on his back), he said to her, "I heard queer sounds in your house; I was feeding near there, and the noise startled me so that I let go of the stone I was holding to, and came up. I think your eggs must be hatching."

"Really?" exclaimed Mrs. Water Spider. "I shall be so glad! A house always seems lonely to me without children." She dove to her house, and found some very fine Water Spider babies there. You may be sure she did not have much time for visiting after that. She had to hunt food and carry it down to her children, and when they were restless and impatient she stayed with them and told them stories of the great world.

Sometimes they teased to go out with her, but this she never allowed. "Wait until you are older," she would say. "It will not be so very long before you can go safely." The children thought it had been a long, long time already, and one of them made a face when his mother said this. She did not see him, and it was well for him that she did not. He should have been very much ashamed of himself for doing it.

The next time Mrs. Water Spider went for food, one of the children said, "I tell you what let's do! Let's all go down to the doorway and peek out." They looked at each other and wondered if they dared. That was something their mother had forbidden them to do. There was no window to look through and they wanted very much to see the world. At last the little fellow who had made a face said, "I'm going to, anyway." After that, his brothers and sisters went, too. And this shows how, if good little Spiders listen to naughty little Spiders, they become naughty little Spiders themselves.

All the children ran down and peeked around the edge of the door, but they couldn't see much besides water, and they had seen that before. They were sadly disappointed. Somebody said, "I'm going to put two of my legs out!" Somebody else said, "I'll put four out!" A big brother said, "I'm going to put six out!" And then another brother said "I'll put eight out! Dare you to!"

You know what naughty little Spiders would be likely to do then. Well, they did it. And, as it happened, they had just pulled their last legs through the open doorway when a Stickleback Father came along. "Aren't you rather young to be out of the nest?" said he, in his most pleasant voice.

Poor little Water Spiders! They didn't know he was one of their mother's friends, and he seemed so big to them, and the bones on his cheeks made him look so queer, and the stickles on his back were so sharp, that every one of them was afraid and let go of the wall of the house—and then!

Every one of them rose quickly to the top, into the light and the open air. They crawled upon a lily-pad and clung there, frightened, and feeling weak in all their knees. The Dragon Flies flew over them, the Wild Ducks swam past them, and on a log not far away they saw a long row of Mud Turtles sunning themselves. Why nothing dreadful happened, one cannot tell. Perhaps it was bad enough as it was, for they were so scared that they could only huddle close together and cry, "We want our mother."

Here Mrs. Water Spider found them. She came home with something for dinner, and saw her house empty. Of course she knew where to look, for, as she said, "If they stepped outside the door, they would be quite sure to tumble up into the air." She took them home, one at a time, and how she ever did

it nobody knows.

When they were all safely there and had eaten the food that was waiting for them, Mrs. Spider, who had not scolded them at all, said, "Look me straight in the eye, every one of you! Will you promise never to run away again?"

Instead of saying at once, "Yes, mother," as they should have done, one of them answered, "Why, we didn't run away. We were just peeking around the edge of the doorway, and we got too far out, and somebody came along and scared us so that we let go, and then we couldn't help falling up into the air."

"Oh, no," said their mother, "you couldn't help it then, of course. But who told you that you might peep out of the door?"

The little Water Spiders hung their heads and looked very much ashamed. Their mother went on, "You needn't say that you were not to blame. You were to blame, and you began to run away as soon as you took the first step toward the door, only you didn't know that you were going so far. Tell me," she said, "whether you would ever have gone to the top of the water if you had not taken that first step?"

The little Water Spiders were more ashamed than ever, but they had to look her in the eye and promise to be good.

It is very certain that not one of those children even peeped around the edge of the doorway from that day until their mother told them that they might go into the world and build houses for themselves. "Remember just one thing," she said, as they started away. "Always take your food home to eat." And they always did, for no Water Spider who has been well brought up will ever eat away from his own home.

The Little Spider's First Web

by Clara Dillingham Pierson

The first thing our little Spider remembered was being crowded with a lot of other little Spiders in a tiny brown house. This tiny house had no windows, and was very warm and dark and stuffy. When the wind blew, the little Spiders would hear it rushing through the forest near by, and would feel their round brown house swinging like a cradle. It was fastened to a bush by the edge of the forest, but they could not know that, so they just wiggled and pushed and ate the food that they found in the house, and wondered what it all meant. They didn't even guess that a mother Spider had made the brown house and put the food in it for her Spider babies to eat when they came out of their eggs. She had put the eggs in, too, but the little Spiders didn't remember the time when they lay curled up in the eggs. They didn't know what had been nor what was to be—they thought that to eat and wiggle and sleep was all of life. You see they had much to learn.

One morning the little Spiders found that the food was all gone, and they pushed and scrambled harder than ever, because they were hungry and wanted more. Exactly what happened nobody knew, but suddenly it grew light, and some of them fell out of the house. All the rest scrambled after, and there they stood, winking and blinking in the bright sunshine, and feeling a little bit dizzy, because they were on a shaky web made of silvery ropes.

Just then the web began to shake even more, and a beautiful great mother Spider ran out on it. She was dressed in black and yellow velvet, and her eight eyes glistened and gleamed in the sunlight. They had never dreamed of such a wonderful creature.

"Well, my children," she exclaimed, "I know you must be hungry, and I have breakfast all ready for you." So they began eating at once, and the mother Spider told them many things about the meadow and the forest, and said they must amuse themselves while she worked to get food for them. There was no father Spider to help her, and, as she said, "Growing children must have plenty of good plain food."

You can just fancy what a good time the baby Spiders had. There were a hundred and seventy of them, so they had no chance to grow lonely, even when their mother was away. They lived in this way for quite a while, and grew bigger and stronger every day. One morning the mother Spider said to her biggest daughter, "You are quite old enough to work now, and I will teach you to spin your web."

The little Spider soon learned to draw out the silvery ropes from the pocket in her body where they were made and kept, and very soon she had one fastened at both ends to branches of the bush. Then her mother made her walk out to the middle of her rope bridge, and spin and fasten two more, so that it looked like a shining cross. After that was done, the mother showed her something like a comb, which is part of a Spider's foot, and taught her how to measure, and put more ropes out from the middle of the cross, until it looked like the spokes of a wheel.

The little Spider got much discouraged, and said, "Let me finish it some other time; I am tired of working now."

The mother Spider answered, "No, I cannot have a lazy child."

The little one said, "I can't ever do it, I know I can't."

"Now," said the mother, "I shall have to give you a Spider scolding. You have acted as lazy as the Tree Frog says boys and girls sometimes do. He has been up near the farm-house, and says that he has seen there children who do not like to work. The meadow people could hardly believe such a thing at first. He says they were cross and unhappy children, and no wonder! Lazy people are never happy. You try to finish the web, and see if I am not right. You are not a baby now, and you must work and get your own food."

So the little Spider spun the circles of rope in the web, and made these ropes sticky, as all careful spiders do. She ate the loose ends and pieces that were left over, to save them for another time, and when it was done, it was so fine and perfect that her brothers and sisters crowded around, saying, "Oh! oh! oh! how beautiful!" and asked the mother to teach them. The little web-spinner was happier than she had ever been before, and the mother began to teach her other children. But it takes a long time to teach a hundred and seventy children.

Source:

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