

Mice with Pockets, and Others

by Thornton W. Burgess

“Pockets are very handy things for little people who are thrifty and who live largely on small seeds. Without pockets in which to carry the seeds, I am afraid some of them would never be able to store up enough food for winter,” began Old Mother Nature, as soon as everybody was on hand the next morning.

“I wouldn't be without my pockets for any thing,” spoke up Striped Chipmunk.

Old Mother Nature smiled. “You certainly do make good use of yours,” said she. “But there are others who have even greater need of pockets, and among them are the Pocket Mice. Of course, it is because of their pockets that they are called Pocket Mice. All of these pretty little fellows live in the dry parts of the Far West and Southwest in the same region where Longfoot the Kangaroo Rat lives. They are close neighbors and relatives of his.

“Midget the Silky Pocket Mouse is one of the smallest animals in all the Great World, so small that Whitefoot the Wood Mouse is a giant compared with him. He weighs less than an ounce and is a dear little fellow. His back and sides are yellow, and beneath he is white. He has quite long hind legs and a long tail, and these show at once that he is a jumper. In each cheek is a pocket opening from the outside, and these pockets are lined with hair. He is called Silky Pocket Mouse because of the fineness and softness of his coat. He has some larger cousins, one of them being a little bigger than Nibbler the House Mouse. Neighbors and close relatives are the Spiny Pocket Mice.”

“Do they have spines like Prickly Porky?” demanded Peter Rabbit.

Old Mother Nature laughed. “I don't wonder you ask,” said she. “I think it is a foolish name myself, for they haven't any spines at all. Their fur isn't as fine as that of Midget, and it has all through it long coarse hairs almost like bristles, and from these they get their name. The smallest of the Spiny Pocket Mice is about the size of Nibbler the House Mouse and the largest is twice as big. They are more slender than their Silky cousins, and their tails are longer in proportion to their size and have little tufts of hair at the ends. Of course, they have pockets in their cheeks.

“In habits all the Pocket Mice are much alike. They make burrows in the ground, often throwing up a little mound with several entrances which lead to a central passageway connecting with the bedroom and storerooms. By day the entrances are closed with earth from inside, for the Mice are active only at night. Sometimes the burrows are hidden under bushes, and sometimes they are right out in the open. Living as they do in a hot, dry country, the Pocket Mice have learned to get along without drinking water. Their food consists mainly of a variety of small seeds.

“Another Mouse of the West looks almost enough like Whitefoot to be a member of his branch of the family. He has a beautiful yellowish-brown coat and white waistcoat, and his feet are white. But his tail is short in comparison with Whitefoot's and instead of being slim is quite thick. His fur is like velvet. He is called the Grasshopper Mouse.”

“Is that because he eats Grasshoppers?” asked Peter Rabbit at once.

“You've guessed it,” laughed Old Mother Nature. “He is very, very fond of Grasshoppers and Crickets. He eats many kinds of insects, Moths, Flies, Cutworms, Beetles, Lizards, Frogs and Scorpions. Because of his fondness for the latter he is called the Scorpion Mouse in some sections. He is fond of meat when he can get it. He also eats seeds of many kinds. He is found all over the West from well up in the North to the hot dry regions of the Southwest. When he cannot find a convenient deserted burrow of some other animal, he digs a home for himself and there raises several families each year. In the early evening he often utters a fine, shrill, whistling call note.

“Another little member of the Mouse family found clear across the country is the Harvest Mouse. He is never bigger than Nibbler the House Mouse and often is much smaller. In fact, he is one of the smallest of the entire family. In appearance he is much like Nibbler, but his coat is browner and there are fine hairs on his tail. He loves grassy, weedy or brushy places.

“As a rule he does little harm to man, for his food is chiefly seeds of weeds, small wild fruits and parts of wild plants of no value to man. Once in a while his family becomes so large that they do some damage in grain fields. But this does not happen often. The most interesting thing about this little Mouse is the way he builds his home. Sometimes he uses a hole in a tree or post and sometimes a deserted birds' nest, but more frequently he builds a nest for himself—a little round ball of grass and other vegetable matter. This is placed in thick grass or weeds close to the ground or in bushes or low trees several feet from the ground.

“They are well-built little houses and have one or more little doorways on the under side when they are in bushes or trees. Inside is a warm, soft bed made of milkweed or cattail down, the very nicest kind of a bed for the babies. No one has a neater home than the Harvest Mouse. He is quite as much at home in bushes and low trees as Happy Jack Squirrel is in bigger trees. His long tail comes in very handy then, for he often wraps it around a twig to make his footing more secure.

“Now this is all about the native Mice and—what is it, Peter?”

“You've forgotten Nibbler the House Mouse,” replied Peter.

“How impatient some little folks are and how fearful that their curiosity will not be satisfied,” remarked Old Mother Nature. “As I was saying, this is all about our native Mice; that is, the Mice who belong to this country. And now we come to Nibbler the House Mouse, who, like Robber the Brown Rat, has no business here at all, but who has followed man all over the world and like Robber has become a pest to man.”

Peter Rabbit looked rather sheepish when he discovered that Old Mother Nature hadn't forgotten, and resolved that in the future he would hold his tongue.

“Have any of you seen Nibbler?” asked Old Mother Nature.

“I have,” replied Danny Meadow Mouse. “Once I was carried to Farmer Brown's barn in a shock of corn and I found Nibbler living in the barn.”

“It is a wonder he wasn't living in Farmer Brown's house,” said Old Mother Nature. “Probably other members of his family were. He is perfectly at home in any building put up by man, just as is Robber the Rat. Because of his small size he can go where Robber cannot. He delights to scamper about between the walls. Being a true Rodent he is forever gnawing holes in the corners of rooms and

opening on to pantry shelves so that he may steal food. He eats all sorts of food, but spoils more for man, by running about over it, than he eats. In barns and henhouses he gets into the grain bins and steals a great deal of grain.

“It is largely because of Robber the Rat and Nibbler that men keep the Cats you all hate so. A Cat is Nibbler's worst enemy. Nibbler is slender and graceful, with a long, hairless tail and ears of good size. He is very timid, ready to dart into his hole at the least sound. He raises from four to nine babies at a time and several sets of them in a year.

“If Mr. and Mrs. Nibbler are living in a house, their nest is made of scraps of paper, cloth, wool and other soft things stolen from the people who live in the house. In getting this material they often do great damage. If they are living in a barn, they make their nest of hay and any soft material they can find.

“While Nibbler prefers to live in or close to the homes of men, he sometimes is driven out and then takes to the fields, especially in summer. There he lives in all sorts of hiding places, and isn't at all particular what the place is, if it promises safety and food can be obtained close by. I'm sorry Nibbler ever came to this country. Man brought him here and now he is here to stay and quite as much at home as if he belonged here the way the rest of you do.

“This finishes the lessons on the order of Rodents, the animals related by reason of having teeth for the purpose of gnawing. I suspect these are the only ones in whom you take any interest, and so you will not care to come to school any more. Am I right?”

“No, marm,” answered Happy Jack the Gray Squirrel, who, you remember, had laughed at Peter Rabbit for wanting to go to school. “No, marm. There are ever so many other people of the Green Forest and the Green Meadows we want to know more about than we now know. Isn't that so?” Happy Jack turned to the others and every one nodded, even Prickly Porky.

“There is one little fellow living right near here who looks to me as if he must be a member of the Mouse family, but he isn't like any of the Mice you have told us about,” continued Happy Jack. “He is so small he can hide under a leaf. I'm sure he must be a Mouse.”

“You mean Teeny Weeny the Shrew,” replied Old Mother Nature, smiling at Happy Jack. “He isn't a Mouse. He isn't even a Rodent. I'll try to have him here to-morrow morning and we will see what we can find out about him and his relatives.”

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