

Why Hooty the Owl Does Not Play on the Green Meadows

by Thornton W. Burgess

The Merry Little Breezes of Old Mother West Wind were having a good-night game of tag down on the Green Meadows. They were having *such* a jolly time while they waited for Old Mother West Wind and her big bag to take them to their home behind the Purple Hills. Jolly, round, red Mr. Sun had already put his nightcap on. Black shadows crept softly out from the Purple Hills onto the Green Meadows. The Merry Little Breezes grew sleepy, almost too sleepy to play, for Old Mother West Wind was very, very late.

Farther and farther and farther out onto the Green Meadows crept the black shadows. Suddenly one seemed to separate from the others. Softly, oh so softly, yet swiftly, it floated over towards the Merry Little Breezes. One of them happened to look up and saw it coming. It was the same Little Breeze who one time stayed out all night. When he looked up and saw this seeming shadow moving so swiftly he knew that it was no shadow at all.

"Here comes Hooty the Owl," cried the Little Breeze.

Then all the Merry Little Breezes stopped their game of tag to look at Hooty the Owl. It is seldom they have a chance to see him, for usually Hooty the Owl does not come out on the Green Meadows until after the Merry Little Breezes are snugly tucked in bed behind the Purple Hills.

"Perhaps Hooty the Owl will tell us why it is that he never comes out to play with us," said one of the Little Breezes.

But just as Hooty the Owl floated over to them up came Old Mother West Wind, and she was in a great hurry, for she was late, and she was tired. She had had a busy day, a very busy day indeed, hunting for a rain cloud which had gone astray. So now she just opened her big bag and tumbled all the Merry Little Breezes into it as fast as she could without giving them so much as a chance to say "Good evening" to Hooty the Owl. Then she took them off home behind the Purple Hills.

Of course the Merry Little Breezes were disappointed, very much disappointed. But they were also very sleepy, for they had played hard all day.

"Never mind," said one of them, drowsily, "to-morrow we'll ask Great-Grandfather Frog why it is that Hooty the Owl never comes out to play with us on the Green Meadows. He'll know."

The next morning Old Mother West Wind was late in coming down from the Purple Hills. When she finally did turn the Merry Little Breezes out of her big bag onto the Green Meadows jolly, round, red Mr. Sun was already quite high in the blue sky. The Merry Little Breezes waited just long enough to say "Good-by" to Old Mother West Wind, and then started a mad race to see who could reach the Smiling Pool first.

There they found Great-Grandfather Frog sitting on his big green lily pad as usual. He was very contented with the world, was Grandfather Frog, for fat green flies had been more foolish than usual that morning and already he had all that he could safely tuck inside his white and yellow waistcoat.

"Good morning, Grandfather Frog," shouted the Merry Little Breezes. "Will you tell us why it is

that Hooty the Owl never comes out to play with us on the Green Meadows?"

"Chug-a-rum," said Great-Grandfather Frog, gruffly, "how should I know?"

You see, Grandfather Frog likes to be teased a little.

"Oh, but you do know, for you are so old and so very wise," cried the Merry Little Breezes all together.

Grandfather Frog smiled, for he likes to be thought very wise, and also he was feeling very good, very good indeed that morning.

"Chug-a-rum," said Grandfather Frog. "If you'll sit perfectly still I'll tell you what I know about Hooty the Owl. But remember, you must sit perfectly still, *per-fect-ly* still."

The Merry Little Breezes sighed, for it is the hardest thing in the world for them to keep perfectly still unless they are asleep. But they promised that they would, and when they had settled down, each one in the heart of a great white water lily, Grandfather Frog began:

"Once upon a time, when the world was young, Hooty the Owl's grandfather a thousand times removed used to fly about in daylight with the other birds. He was very big and very strong and very fierce, was Mr. Owl. He had great big claws and a hooked bill, just as Hooty the Owl has now, and he was afraid of nothing and nobody.

"Now when people are very big and very strong and afraid of nothing and nobody they are very apt to care for nothing and nobody but themselves. So it was with Mr. Owl. Whatever he saw that he wanted he took, no matter to whom it belonged, for there was no one to stop him.

"As I have already told you, Mr. Owl was very big and very strong and very fierce and he was a very great glutton. It took a great many little birds and little animals to satisfy his appetite. But he didn't stop there! No, Sir, he didn't stop there! He used to kill harmless little meadow people just for the fun of killing, and because he could. Every day he grew more savage. Finally no one smaller than himself dared stir on the Green Meadows when he was around. The little birds no longer sang. The Fieldmice children no longer played among the meadow grasses. Those were sad days, very sad days indeed on the Green Meadows," said Grandfather Frog, with a sigh.

"At last old Mother Nature came to visit the Green Meadows and she soon saw what a terrible state things were in. No one came to meet her, for you see no one dared to show himself for fear of fierce old Mr. Owl.

"Now I have told you that Mr. Owl was afraid of nothing and nobody, but this is not quite true, for he was afraid, very much afraid of old Mother Nature. When he saw her coming he was sitting on top of a tall dead stump and he at once tried to look very meek and very innocent.

"Old Mother Nature wasted no time. 'Where are all my little meadow people and why do they not come to give me greeting?' demanded old Mother Nature of Mr. Owl.

"Mr. Owl bowed very low. 'I'm sure I don't know. I think they must all be taking a nap,' said he.

"Now you can't fool old Mother Nature and it's of no use to try. No, Sir, you can't fool old Mother Nature. She just looked at Mr. Owl and she looked at the feathers and fur scattered about the foot of the dead stump. Mr. Owl stood first on one foot and then on the other. He tried to look old Mother Nature in the face, but he couldn't. You see, Mr. Owl had a guilty conscience and a guilty conscience never looks anyone straight in the face. He did wish that Mother Nature would say something, did Mr. Owl. But she didn't. She just looked and looked and looked and looked straight at Mr. Owl. The longer she looked the uneasier he got and the faster he shifted from one foot to the other. Finally he shifted so fast that he seemed to be dancing on top of the old stump.

"Gradually, a few at a time, the little meadow people crept out from their hiding places and formed a great circle around the old dead stump. With old Mother Nature there they felt sure that no harm could come to them. Then they began to laugh at the funny sight of fierce old Mr. Owl hopping from one foot to the other on top of the old dead stump. It was the first laugh on the Green Meadows for a long, long, long time.

"Of course Mr. Owl saw them laughing at him, but he could think of nothing but the sharp eyes of old Mother Nature boring straight through him, and he danced faster than ever. The faster he danced the funnier he looked, and the funnier he looked the harder the little meadow people laughed.

"Finally old Mother Nature slowly raised a hand and pointed a long forefinger at Mr. Owl. All the little meadow people stopped laughing to hear what she would say.

"'Mr. Owl,' she began, 'I know and you know why none of my little meadow people were here to give me greeting. And this shall be your punishment: From now on your eyes shall become so tender that they cannot stand the light of day, so that hereafter you shall fly about only after round, red Mr. Sun has gone to bed behind the Purple Hills. No more shall my little people who play on the Green Meadows all the day long have cause to fear you, for no more shall you see to do them harm.'

"When she ceased speaking all the little meadow people gave a great shout, for they knew that it would be even as Mother Nature had said. Then began such a frolic as the Green Meadows had not known for many a long day.

"But Mr. Owl flew slowly and with difficulty over to the darkest part of the deep wood, for the light hurt his eyes dreadfully and he could hardly see. And as he flew the little birds flew around him in a great cloud and plucked out his feathers and tormented him for he could not see to harm them."

Grandfather Frog paused and looked dreamily across the Smiling Pool. Suddenly he opened his big mouth and then closed it with a snap. One more foolish green fly had disappeared inside the white and yellow waistcoat.

"Chug-a-rum," said Grandfather Frog, "those were sad days, sad days indeed for Mr. Owl. He couldn't hunt for his meals by day, for the light blinded him. At night he could see but little in the darkness. So he got little to eat and he grew thinner and thinner and thinner until he was but a shadow of his former self. He was always hungry, was Mr. Owl, always hungry. No one was afraid of him now, for it was the easiest thing in the world to keep out of his way.

"At last old Mother Nature came again to visit the Green Meadows and the Green Forest. Far, far in the darkest part of the deep wood she found Mr. Owl. When she saw how very thin and how very, very miserable he was her heart was moved to pity, for old Mother Nature loves all her subjects, even

the worst of them. All the fierceness was gone from Mr. Owl. He was so weak that he just sat huddled in the thickest part of the great pine. You see he had been able to catch very little to eat.

"Mr. Owl,' said old Mother Nature gently, 'you now know something of the misery and the suffering which you have caused others, and I think you have been punished enough. No more may you fly abroad over the Green Meadows while the day is bright, for still is the fear of you in the hearts of all my little meadow people, but hereafter you shall not find it so difficult to get enough to eat. Your eyes shall grow big, bigger than the eyes of any other bird, so that you shall be able to see in the dusk and even in the dark. Your ears shall grow large, larger than the ears of any of the little forest or meadow people, so that you can hear the very least sound. Your feathers shall become as soft as down, so that when you fly none shall hear you.'

"And from that day it was even so. Mr. Owl's eyes grew big and bigger until he could see as well in the dusk as he used to see in the full light of day. His ears grew large and larger until his hearing became so keen that he could hear the least rustle, even at a long distance. And when he flew he made no sound, but floated like a great shadow.

"The little meadow people no longer feared him by day, but when the shadows began to creep out from the Purple Hills each night and they heard his voice 'Whoo-too-whoohoo-hoo' they felt all the old fear of him. If they were wise they did not stir, but if they were foolish and so much as shivered Mr. Owl was sure to hear them and silently pounce upon them.

"So once more Mr. Owl grew strong and fierce. But only at night had anyone cause to fear him, and then only the foolish and timid.

"And now you know," concluded Grandfather Frog, "why it is that Hooty the Owl never comes out to play with you on the Green Meadows, and why his eyes are so big and his ears so large."

"Thank you, thank you, Grandfather Frog!" cried the Merry Little Breezes, springing up from the white water lilies and stretching themselves. "We'll bring you the first foolish green fly we can find."

Then away they rushed to hunt for it.

Source:

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