

A Very Small Bunny Has a Very Big Adventure

by John Breck

The air was blowing in at the mouth of his hole when Little Nibble Rabbit opened his eyes. That meant a cold south wind outside, a rainy wind. He could see the wet drops hanging from the top of his arched earth doorway. They would wet his back when he tried to go out and that wouldn't be nice. He shivered and closed his eyes again. Then he huddled up tighter than ever into a little furry brown ball. Still he was cold, so he tried to cuddle into the very farthest corner where his mother always slept. It was empty!

That woke him up. "Mammy," he called softly; "Mammy." No answer. He put his nose to the earth and found it still warm. She could not have been gone very long. So he crawled to the mouth of the hole and thumped with his little hind feet, making all the noise he dared. Then he sat up and cocked his ears for her answering thump. He half expected a glimpse of her white tail bobbing down one of the tunnels through the Prickly Ash Thicket. But no mother was there.

"She can't go off and leave me like this," he said to himself, and he put down his nose to find her trail. It was all washed out by the rain. Thump, thump! he went again—and they were cross thumps because he was so terribly disappointed. Then he suddenly sat down on his little tufty tail and wailed "Mammy, mammy, mammy!" at the top of his voice.

"Cheer up, Bunny. What's wrong," chirped some one from a branch just over his head. It was Bobby Robin, and he was peering down with the most puzzled and astonished look in his black eye.

"I'm Nibble," sobbed the little rabbit, "and I've lost my mother."

"Well, Nibble," warned Bobby in his sensible way, "if she doesn't come back pretty soon she'll lose her son. Don't you know better than to tell Killer Weasel and Silvertip the Fox, and Hooter the Owl, and any one else who wants to know where they'll find a nice young rabbit for breakfast?"

But the tears ran faster than ever down Nibble's whiskers. "It's Hooter," he sniffed. "He caught her when she went down to the brook for a drink. I know he did. She'd never leave me."

"Nonsense," said Bobby, and he said it peckishly, for no one likes to hear a little rabbit cry. "I know your mother, and she knows the law of the woods. You can fly—run, I mean—can't you. And feed yourself?"

"Yes," answered Nibble, for his brothers and sisters had gone to dig their own holes and find their own food weeks ago.

"Well, then," finished Bobby, nodding wisely to himself, "if there's any fresh rabbit fur under Hooter's tree it's not your mother's."

To his surprise Nibble stopped squeezing the tears from his eyes and opened them wide. "I'm going to look!" he announced. And he began to scrub his face and polish off his ears with his little soft forepaws.

“Going to look where?” asked Bobby Robin.

“Oh, lots of places—the Clover Patch, and the Brush Pile, and the Broad Field. But first I’m going to see if there’s any fur under Hooter’s tree.”

“What?” squawked Bobby. He came tumbling down to the ground where he could make Nibble look him straight in the eye and listen to an awful lecture.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” he said. “Now that you have to see and hear and smell and feel for yourself you will have to be twice as careful as you ever were before. You may remember all the things your mother taught you—now you’ll have to do them. And she took all that trouble with you so you could be a sensible, clever rabbit and keep out of danger, not so you’d run right off the minute she left you and offer Hooter a free meal.” Bobby was so worried about Nibble he forgot that the ground was no place for a sensible bird.

“But I must know if Hooter caught her,” pleaded Nibble, “and I will be careful.” He sat up and sniffed all around with his nice clean nose that had been all swollen from crying when Bobby Robin found him. And he pricked up his tidy ears, just to show how careful he meant to be. And he heard a soft little noise behind him. It wasn’t two grass stalks rubbing together, though it was as tiny as that. It was the scraping Glider the Blacksnake makes when he slips across a stone!

Nibble’s feet just bounced of themselves, and Bobby’s wings beat, and Glider’s ugly head landed right between them. For Glider hears everything that goes on along the ground. He had heard Nibble stamping to call his mother. If Mammy Rabbit had answered Glider would never have come. But she didn’t—so Glider did. And now lonely little Nibble Rabbit was racing off and Glider was after him, simply boiling over with rage, as fast as he could put tail to the ground. He didn’t think Nibble could run so very far. He was sure he would catch him.

For a minute Nibble thought so too. Scared! Nibble Rabbit was too scared to think. He just ran. Every jump he made was longer and higher than the one before until he was sailing over the tops of the tallest grasses. My, but he wanted his mammy—that was because he was so dreadfully scared. Then he wanted a place to hide. Presently he remembered the Brush Pile. He turned toward it and he didn’t even hide his trail the way he had been taught—that’s how scared he was.

But just as he reached it he remembered something his mother had told him, which was just what she hoped he would do. “If the thing that chases you wears feathers take to a hole. If it wears fur don’t put your nose into any hole that hasn’t another end. If it wears scales keep to the open and run as fast and as far as you can.” And scales are exactly what Glider wears.

Now he knew exactly what to do, and he wasn’t quite as scared. He just bounced up on the Brush Pile and kept on going until he bounced off again on the other side. He raced through the Clover Patch and down the Broad Field between the shocks of corn. The field was all muddy from the rain and his feet slipped and slid and his little heart went bump, bump, against his sides, as though some one were hitting him. He wasn’t even frightened any more—he was too tired. But he kept on.

Then he heard a voice calling him: “Nibble, Nibble, wait!” It was no hissy voice of a snake. It was Bobby Robin.

So he turned into one of the nice little tents made by the shocks of corn. And Bobby had to

catch his breath before he could talk. “You’re safe,” he gasped. “You lost Glider way back there. I asked you if you could fly. You can. You fly faster than a thistledown in a north wind.” And Nibble twitched his nose into a pleased smile, while Bobby stopped to fan himself with his wings. “Glider couldn’t see you bounce off on the other side of the Brush Pile,” he explained when he got his breath, “because his head is so near the ground.”

Nibble’s ears flew up in surprise. “Couldn’t he smell me?” he asked. If he couldn’t, then here indeed was a new thing he had learned.

Bobby cocked his head sidewise with a most mischievous air. “He could follow you to the edge of the Clover Patch. But he lost you the minute you went out into the Broad Field. Look at your feet, Nibble. You didn’t leave any scent after you got your little mud boots.”

Nibble held up one forepaw and looked at it. Then he put out a hind one and looked at that, too. Sure enough the sticky mud of the Broad Field had matted into his fur so that he was wearing a fine little set of boots that came half way to his knees. He looked down the row of slippy, slidy tracks he had made. “There’s where I got them,” he said. “I should think Glider would see where I’d gone.”

“Glider!” laughed Bobby scornfully. “Why, Glider’s too blind and stupid to see anything. He’s nosing around on the Brush Pile right this minute, looking for the hole you didn’t run into. And the little sticks tickle his stomach, and he’s getting hungrier and hungrier and crosser and crosser until—oh, I say, Nibble, I’ve just got to go back and see the fun. Come along!” Bobby giggled a throatful of chuckling notes and flitted off, winking his tail-feathers to beckon Nibble.

But it didn’t seem like fun to Nibble. He was still so weak and shaky after his run that he trembled every time Bobby spoke Glider’s name. What he wanted was to find his mother—or at least to know that she wasn’t a little matted ball of fur under Hooter the Owl’s tree. “I’d go and look right now,” he said to himself, “if I didn’t have to pass that Brush Pile.”

Suddenly he knew that now was his chance, while he still had his little mud boots on. Softly he crept through the Clover Patch for fear Glider might be lurking in the long grass, ready to pounce on him. But long before he reached the Brush Pile itself he knew exactly where the wicked snake was. He was right on top of it.

He was right on top of it, and what is more, Bobby Robin was circling about his ugly head to jeer at him. “Yah!” Bobby was shouting, “Heap big hunter, beaten by a bunny! Better go catch frogs in a marsh!”

Now Nibble knew that was a most insulting thing to say. For a frog is so stupid that almost anything can catch him—especially a snake. If a frog can possibly dive he hides under a lily pad. If he can’t he just squawks and waits to be eaten, like a helpless baby bird.

Bobby was squawking loudly enough, only he wasn’t waiting to be eaten. He was taking very good care not to be. But he was coming so close to it that Nibble almost forgot everything else in watching him. There was one thing he did remember, though, and that was that the wicked snake had nearly caught him by sneaking up from behind. So he took proper rabbit care that no one should do that again. He found a nice log where he could see what was going on, but he didn’t hop straight up on it. He took three short little leaps past it, and one great big bound back to his perch. Since he still had on his little mud boots which had hidden his trail from Glider out in the Broad Field, he felt pretty safe.

And when he crouched down like a small brown knot on the log no one seemed to notice him.

Somebody might have noticed easily enough for Bobby and Glider were making such a terrible racket that every one was coming to listen to them. The grasses were full of mice and the bushes were full of sparrows who all hated the snake. Even Chatter Squirrel, who doesn't get on with Bobby any too well himself, came leaping across his pathway among the branches.

"Snail eater, snail eater!" yelled Bobby. Which was the awfulest thing he could have thought of. To accuse a blacksnake of eating those disgusting soft woodslugs—ugh! What he eats is nice warm food, like mice and bunnies and birds—if he can catch them. But he couldn't catch Bobby Robin as he danced on his wings just out of reach. He missed a particularly ugly snap and slapped his nose very hard when it came down on a nubby branch. That made him open his mouth and hiss like a small steam engine.

"That's right," said Bobby, pretending to be very sympathetic. "Spit the mud out of your mouth and maybe you'll learn to sing."

Chatter Squirrel laughed so hard at this that he had to hold on tight to a piece of bark to steady himself. And Nibble sat straight up with his muddy little paws dangling right against his clean shirt front and stared with all his eyes. He had his ear cocked so he wouldn't miss a word of Glider's answer. For now Glider was maddest of all. No snake can stand being reminded that he has to go around with his chin in the dust.

He stopped whipping his head about and tied himself into a tight coil, with his cold eyes glittering from the very middle of it. And he hissed in his cold voice: "I'll teach you Woodsfolk whether you dare make fun of me!"

"Oh," whispered a thrush perched right over Nibble's head, "I'm afraid for Bobby. If Glider ever makes any one look him straight in the eye they never get away from him." He said it in a scared voice and Nibble could see that was exactly what Glider was trying to do.

Suddenly he felt himself crouch back against the log again, ears tucked between his shoulders, whiskers twitching with the smell of fox in his nostrils. His muscles did these things of themselves before he really knew that Silvertip was standing at his very elbow. He had followed Nibble's footsteps to the end of the trail right past the perch to where Nibble had jumped back.

Nibble didn't move. Silvertip raised his head and cocked his ears at the noise over on the Brush Pile. Then he hung out his tongue in what wasn't entirely a sly smile. It was partly thinking how good Glider the Blacksnake would taste. He made a little rush, with a bounce at the end, like Nibble's bounce, right into the middle of the Brush Pile.

"Help!" shrieked Bobby Robin. But Glider never spoke a single word. Neither did Silvertip. His mouth was too full. Glider was in it.

Source:

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