

## Nibble Rabbit to the Rescue!

By John Breck

“Go up on the bank and find the quail,” Doctor Muskrat had advised. So Nibble Rabbit set out as obediently as possible, because he meant to do exactly what the nice old gentleman told him to, though he didn’t know something that had happened while he was taking his nap on the snug little raft among the reeds.

You see, Doctor Muskrat had heard the quail come fluttering down to the pond for their evening drink, and he remembered that Bob White has the kindest heart in the world. So he squealed, very softly. And Bob flew right out to see what he wanted.

“Look at this bunny,” whispered the doctor, pointing his paddle paw at Nibble. “Whatever am I going to do with him? I can’t take him into the underwater door to my own house, because he can’t dive. And if I make a hole in my roof it will leak, and besides it will be far too convenient for that clever mink, Slyfoot. He’d come right in by my regular tunnel if he didn’t know I was asleep with my teeth bared at the end of it. Couldn’t you look after him until morning?”

“Surely I will,” answered Bob White. “Send him along as soon as he wakes. I’ll have our Watch Bird keep an eye out for him.” And off he flew.

So Nibble was hopping ashore repeating to himself his fortune that the stars had told the doctor for him.

“By dusk and by dawn he shall travel alone  
And all troubles are his excepting his own.”

And he wasn’t lonely any more because, you see, that was part of his fortune.

But this time he didn’t travel alone very far. For just as he passed a nice, home-like looking thicket, out stepped a bird. “Come along,” he called cheerfully. “The rest of the flock are settled down by this time. I’ll show you the way.” And he went scuttling ahead through the grasses with Nibble hopping at his heels.

They were right near a cluster of comfortable little thorn trees which grew on the edge of the Bluff where it leaned away out over the Sandy Beach below when they heard a startling noise. And the quail that was with Nibble spread his wings and hurried on as fast as he could fly. For the quail weren’t asleep at all. They were just ahead of him, all fluttering and scuttling and crying together.

“Danger!” thought Nibble. For it made his very heart beat fast just to hear them. “Which way shall I run?” Then he remembered the last line of his fortune; so he crept up closer instead. Presently he stopped to listen—a weak little voice from under his very feet called, “Whit, whit!” in the saddest tone.

He sat straight up and demanded: “What’s the trouble?”

“Oh,” mourned Bob White, frantically beating his wings, “my mother ran under the edge of the bank and the earth caved in. And we can’t dig her out again.”

And they couldn't, either, for the clay was all full of the tough, tangled roots of the thorns.

"I can," said Nibble Rabbit. "All troubles are mine but my own. Where do I begin?"

So they showed him the little bit of a hole where they had tried it themselves and he settled his strong hindfeet and moved the little clawed spades of his forepaws so fast they fairly twinkled. When he found a root he used his chisel teeth. As soon as he gnawed it through his paws would begin to fly again. And the quail crowded around and whispered to each other. Presently they began to croon a sort of song. "He's coming, coming, coming soon." And the little quail deep in the bank would answer.

The earth was loose, so she didn't quite smother, but she did need a full breath of air. The time seemed very long to her. But it seemed longer still to Nibble Rabbit. Those roots were so tough his jaws ached. He had dug so hard his legs were getting numb. And the birds outside had lost sight of his tufty white tail. But they knew how he was working, for they could see the dirt fly when he kicked his strong hind feet to clear it out of the hole.

Soon his little claws almost refused to move. But he wouldn't let them stop! Then the "Whit!" sounded almost in his ear. Now his feet fairly flew of themselves for a dozen strokes and—Victory! A weak little bunch of brown feathers burst through the clay wall. And he backed out and helped Mother Quail to the cool fresh air outside the hole.

Nibble saw the quail all crowd around her, smoothing her ruffled feathers, loosening the dirt that was caked into them, and making little soft noises of delight that she was safe again. Then gradually he didn't see anything at all. He had come as near fainting as any wild thing ever does except Mister Possum, who mostly pretends, and scary little Keree the Rail. He had fallen into a sound sleep.

When he awoke he felt something tugging his ears. He opened his eyes and lay still, oh, so comfortable and warm. But the tugging kept up until he shook his head. Then Bob White whispered softly: "Come on, Nibble. Our Watch Bird has signalled that Slyfoot the Mink is swimming this way. We must hide."

So Nibble sat up, very stiff and sore. And he found why he had been so snug. Little quail were cuddled all around him. One by one they took their heads from under their wings, shook themselves, and got ready to fly. And overhead in the darkness he could hear the Quails' Watch Bird giving the hurry call. When he looked hard he could see the bird craning his neck against the dusky sky.

So he shook himself, too, and followed Bob White as he led the flock in and out of the bushes. Pretty soon Bob gave a low whispering whistle and the birds took wing. "Make a triangle, Nibble, over to the top of that log and then jump where you hear me call," he said.

So Nibble limped off past the log, turned back on his trail and dragged himself up on it. My but he was tired. He almost fell asleep once more out in that cold wind. But Bob's whistle waked him again. He jumped and found his legs all tangled in a wild grape vine.

That set Bob laughing softly. "It's too bad," he said, "but you see I forgot you couldn't perch like a bird."

But Nibble didn't mind. He just kicked and wriggled until he tumbled to the ground and the blanket of little quail closed around him again.

Early in the morning a soft order woke him. “Hold your scent! Hold your scent!” He didn’t know exactly what it meant, but all the quail stopped ruffling their feathers to keep warm and closed them tight about their bodies. So he sleeked his fur and listened with all his ears. And he just caught the faintest sniffing—from the top of the log, not ten feet away. It wasn’t any bird. It was—Slyfoot! And, oh! how Nibble trembled. But the quail didn’t; they were only very still. And then Nibble heard another tiny sound—the sound of twigs scraping together. That was Bob White slipping through the branches. He was walking along an overhead pathway, so as not to make a whir with his wings.

Soon Nibble heard Bob beating and flapping over behind the log. “Oh,” he cried. “My wing—my poor wing! Oh, it’s broken! Help, Oh-h-h!” Nibble wanted to go, but the other quail held him still.

Plump! went Slyfoot, all feet at once, as he jumped for the crippled bird. “Har-r-r!” he snarled as he just missed a mouthful of feathers. He jumped again. “Oh-h! Help!” wailed Bob as he flapped off. And the sounds died in the distance.

But just as Nibble was beginning to scold the Quail because they wouldn’t let him go and lead Slyfoot away, Bob came sailing into the thicket with his wing as good as ever. He was laughing. “Topknots and Tail-feathers!” he exclaimed, “but I gave Slyfoot a merry chase! He’s over in the Briers by the Pasture fence with his feet as prickery as a set of thistle-burs.” He limped over the dry leaves to show how Slyfoot walked with pricklers in his paws.

Nibble laughed with him. “Won’t he be angrier than ever?” he asked.

“He’s never anything else,” chuckled Bob cheerfully. “But he won’t bother us again until he thinks we’ve forgotten about him. So we’ll get our breakfast before we move.” And all the birds began scuttling about, making as much noise as they pleased. When Nibble dug himself a root they all crowded around for a taste of it, so there was very little left for himself. But they shook off some fresh thorn-apples for him and when he wanted to try the sumach they thought was so nice they perched on a branch until they weighed it down within his reach.

They ate and ate, for they were getting ready to travel. Of course they haven’t any trunks to pack, but they pack their little crops instead until they can hardly fly.

“We can’t sleep here again,” Bob explained, “until the dark of the next moon. Then you’ll know where to find us.”

“Why?” demanded Nibble curiously.

“Slyfoot will stay here until then, because he knows all the hiding places. You mayn’t believe it, but he’s afraid to travel by moonlight on account of Hooter the Owl. Just the same, he is as restless as we are. On the first dark night he looks for a new hunting place as far away as he can.”

“Where are you going?” Nibble wanted to know. He felt sorry to lose them.

Bob stood up and flapped his wings to feel the air. “East or west,” he answered. “This wind is north. And it’s very strong. We couldn’t go far against it and if we went south it would tip up our tails and send us tumbling. But if we fly across it will lift us and help us along.” He took a little trial trip. Then he settled beside Nibble again. “West,” he said, “to the deepest woods. There’s a smell of

weather. Come on. Whit! Whit! Good-bye, Nibble.” And they whirred away before Nibble could ask what Bob meant.

Source:

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