

What Happens When Folks Lose Their Tempers

by John Breck

Nibble found out pretty soon what “a smell of weather” meant. When he went down to the Pond for a drink he saw a family of ducks. Some of them were paddling around and some had gone to sleep on shore in the sun. He spoke to one who had a beautiful green head and shiny blue feathers in his wings. “Good morning,” he said timidly.

“Eh? What?” quacked the duck in his hoarse voice, ruffling his feathers angrily. “Oh, a rabbit. Good morning.”

“Slyfoot the Mink lives here,” warned Nibble. “You might be caught before you know.”

“Thank you,” said the duck “we’re going South in half an hour.”

“Won’t the wind tip you?” Nibble meant to be kind.

“Ho, ho,” laughed the duck. “You’ve been talking to the quail. Of course not. We’re Mallards. We fly faster than the wind. Now I’ll tell you something. This wind is carrying more than ducks. Can’t you smell it?”

Nibble sat up and sniffed very carefully. “It’s queer and dry,” he said, “and it seems to make my fur want to stand on end.”

“Go make yourself a nest, Bunny,” said the duck good-naturedly. “What you smell is a Terrible Storm coming, and it’s coming mighty fast.” He turned back his shining green head to fix the little curly feathers that quirked up over his tail. Below his white collar he wore a vest of the rich red which all rabbits especially admire, and Nibble was quite awed by his elegance.

“Come along,” he called to the other ducks who were paddling about in the shallow water and feeding among the roots of the water lilies. “It’s time you put your wings in order for a long trip.” And he set the example by spreading his own feathers and laying them very cleverly with his wide beak.

Nibble noticed a lady duck who wore the same colours as himself. She stood on her head with just her tail and her yellow legs showing out of water, until he was really afraid she was drowning. When she did come up straight again she paddled ashore as fast as she could. “The fish know,” she told her mate. “There’s not a fin stirring, and that big pickerel I was afraid of has buried himself in the mud. When the fish know about a storm it’s high time we were gone.” And she began preening her feathers in a great hurry.

“Are you afraid of a fish?” Nibble was surprised.

“Sometimes,” said she. “If it’s big enough to catch us by the leg and pull us under the water. We take turns watching while we have our heads down. Everything is afraid of something. But I’m much more afraid of that big black cloud and the thing that’s driving it.” And she went back to preening harder than ever.

“You see, Bunny,” said her good-natured mate, “this is really no ordinary storm. We saw it grow. We were way up north where the wind sings in the pines and the ice cracks like the shot of a gun. And this storm woke up. It wasn’t very big at first, and it cried very softly. Pretty soon it stood up over the tree tops, taller and taller every minute. And then it began to howl. It howled so loudly that even the wolves stopped to listen. But we didn’t. We came away very quickly, before it could catch us. And we’ll keep on going until it stops.”

“What will it do if it catches you?” demanded Nibble, opening his eyes very wide.

“It’ll throw snow all over us so we can’t see our way to fly,” answered the lady duck. “It’ll cover up all the water with ice so we can’t feed. When it’s very bad we can’t even find a hole big enough to thaw our feet in. Ugh! I hate to fly so fast. We ought to have come three days ago. I knew what it was the first day when it snarled at the wind. It wasn’t afraid!”

“Afraid?” Nibble sat up and wiggled his ears at the idea. “Are storms ever afraid?”

“Of course,” said she, as though he ought to have known. “I told you everything is afraid of something.”

Nibble knew this was true. Here he was afraid of Slyfoot, and Slyfoot was afraid of Hooter. The ducks were afraid of the storm, and the storm was afraid of—

“Afraid of the wind!” finished Madame Mallard. “As long as a storm can keep its head nothing can stop it. But it doesn’t. Sooner or later it breaks into a rage and begins to thrash around. When a storm really loses its temper the next sensible wind can smash it into bits. It never pays to lose your temper. Something always happens if you do.”

Nibble was very much excited. But he wasn’t too excited to think of a good place to hide. There was that nice little tent made by a leaning shock of corn out in the Broad Field. As he passed the Brushpile, Chatter Squirrel was darting up a hickory tree with a mouthful of leaves. “There’s going to be a Terrible Storm,” called Nibble cheerfully, “the Mallards just told me about it.”

“Who doesn’t know that?” snapped Chatter, fussing with a clutter of leaves and twigs in the crotch of his hickory. “My home’s not half done. I thought I’d take my time and make a good one. Now here comes this Storm! If I can’t get it finished I’ll have to go over to that leaky old Oak that has bats in it. Yah!” And he swore in Squirrel language because one of the sticks he was using had snapped and he had to go for another one.

“The Ducks say you musn’t lose your temper, because something always happens,” quoted Nibble. And he didn’t mean to be impertinent. He was just pleased with himself for remembering it.

“It’ll happen to you, then,” Chatter retorted in a rage. “You and your ducks! You’ll stand there trying to mind my business for me until Silvertip catches you.” But there’s no way of knowing how much angrier Chatter might have been because right then something did happen. He gave one shriek—“Hooter!”—and made a flying leap for that hollow Oak Tree. And Mrs. Hooter clapped her beak at the hole.

“Stickly Prickles!” said Nibble to himself—that really isn’t swearing. “What are those owls doing out this time of the day?” For he could see Hooter flapping sleepily along behind his mate. It was

too early in the day for him. It was a badly frightened rabbit who made the best of his chance while they were chasing Chatter to dart across the Cloverpatch and into the first shock he came to.

But he didn't stay there. Just as he began to breathe again he heard the voice of Mrs. Hooter right above him. She was speaking crossly to her husband. "Pay attention," she said. "It may be three days before we can hunt again. He went in there. I saw him."

Nibble guessed that a small brown rabbit was the "he" they wanted, so he slipped out of the other side of that shock and ran across to the next.

"There he goes!" screeched Mrs. Hooter. "There he goes! Catch him, quick!" But Hooter was too slow. Nibble was safe again.

But was he? For in that second shock slept—Silvertip the Fox!

Silvertip was curled up in a ball with his tail about his feet. Of course he woke up the minute he heard the Hooters and pricked up his ears. Whatever were they shouting about?

In all that noise he never heard the soft sound of Nibble's breathing right behind him. He never sniffed anything but Owl. For they were very close.

"Go in and drive him out!" ordered Mrs. Hooter.

"I—er—I've never done anything of the kind," Hooter objected. "I don't think I care to begin."

"Coward!" hissed Mrs. Hooter. And she flew into a terrible temper. She shook him until his beak rattled. Then she bounced him down. "You see to it that you catch him when he comes out!" she raved. "I'll go myself!"

And she did. Right into Silvertip! And let me tell you that for one minute feathers flew and fur frazzled. Then Mrs. Hooter flew squawking out one side and Silvertip limped yelping out of the other and Nibble said to himself, "I'm so glad it wasn't my temper that was lost." He had the little cornstalk tent all to himself. A clawful of feathers and a beakful of fur were all that was left of the fight. "And they can't come back," he said to himself, "because nobody could move in this awful wind."

For right that minute the Terrible Storm swooped down out of its Black Cloud. "Look out," it shrieked, "I'm bad! I'll show you what I can do to you if I want to. Old Earth, I'm going to turn you upside down! I'll make you into a rubbish pile, I will! Wow-w-w!" Which was very mean because it had no quarrel with the Old Earth and the poor wild things.

Nibble shook to the tips of his furry little toes when he heard it. Once he tried to poke his nose out, just a tiny bit, to see what was happening, but the Terrible Storm tweaked his whiskers and threw snow into his eyes. So he backed in again and listened to the trees shouting to each other. "Oh! Oh! I'm cracking! Hold me! Please, please—I'm going to fall!"

Pretty soon he heard a terrible groan with a crash at the end of it. And then he heard a little sound wailing above the wind and the trees. It was calling for help. It was Chatter Squirrel! Then he knew it was the Big Oak who stood alone by the Clover Patch that had blown down.

Suddenly Nibble found he wasn't scared of that bully of a Storm. That is, not so very, very scared. Not too scared to crawl out of his tent, digging his little toes into the ground to keep from blowing away, his nose close down in the grasses, his eyes half closed to keep out the snow and look for poor Chatter. He called once or twice, but he was very close before Chatter could hear.

"Where am I?" he sobbed. "Oh, my nest is all smashed and I don't know where I am. Is this the end of the world?"

"No," said Nibble, and he nearly laughed because Chatter was so funny when he was afraid. "It's only the end of the Big Oak. I have a place to sleep and plenty of food. Come along."

"Me too," called Gimlet the Little Downy Woodpecker who lived in a branch of the tree. "Us too," chorused all the little field-mice who had burrowed in its roots. And "Us, too," piped three partridges who had been snuggled in the bushes beside it. Even two little bats who had lived in the tall dark cave of its hollow trunk came scuttling and crawling, holding on tight to whatever fur they could touch.

Every one came but Cheewee the Chickadee who said he would do very nicely where he was, although his nest, an old woodpecker hole, was all queer and upside down.

They scuttled along together, traveling fast because now the wind was pushing them from behind. And the snow drove under their feathers and fur until it stung their very skins and nipped the ends of Nibble's blowy ears, but he kept saying, "I'm going to have a party! I'm going to have a party!" so pleased and happy that every one was trying to smile by the time they reached his little cornstalk house.

The Terrible Storm had tried to knock that down, but only spread it out so there was more room in it than ever. And the snow had tried to smother it, but had only succeeded in stopping up the cracks so that it was snug and warm. And the bats hung themselves upside down from the middle of it and turned down their little webby tails over their toes like the flap of an envelope and went to sleep again.

Source:

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