

Nibble Rabbit's Storm Party

by John Breck

For three days and three nights Nibble Rabbit's storm party stayed in the little Cornstalk tent in the middle of the Broad Field. The Terrible Storm might behave as badly as it pleased but they were having too good a time to care. And it might yowl as loudly as it could but they were making too much noise to listen. For they knew that no one was going to interrupt them.

When nobody could eat any more they began to amuse themselves. First of all they had a dance. The three partridges could drum with their wings and Nibble with his feet, for they learned it from the Indians. Gimlet the Woodpecker tapped with much spirit on an empty corn cob, and Chatter Squirrel called out the directions, while the mice did the dancing.

The little lady mice held their tails like trains, sweeping the ground when they curtsied, but their partners cocked their tails to the left side, and Chatter got so excited that he waved his about in time to his commands and curled the tip of it when they bowed. And the partridges thought he was so funny that they nearly had to stop drumming to laugh at him.

When the mice were so breathless from whirling and twirling that they had to stop they urged Nibble to take a turn. "We've seen you," they said, "on moonlight nights when we dance inside the Fairy Rings." You see the mushrooms make little dance halls for the Fairies to use on Midsummer Eve. They have smooth, velvety grass on the inside with a circle of little cushiony stools around them. And the mice use them after the Fairies are through. Only they use the seats to hide under when Hooter the Owl flits past. They nibble them, too, for refreshments. You can see their toothmarks on every Fairy Ring you find after midsummer.

"I can't dance," murmured Nibble. He felt a bit embarrassed. Rabbits do try sometimes out in the brush where they think no one can see them, but they are very clumsy about it. "I never learned," he explained.

"Dear me," said a lively little mouse. "Why don't you step into a Charmed Circle some night when the moon smiles? Then you can't help dancing."

"Yes indeed," chimed in Chatter, who calls out their dances for the elves and so knows more about them than anybody else. "You know the May Moon draws the Circle as soon as the trees bud their leaves, so she can tell where there is no danger of their casting a shadow on the Great Ball. Some of the wee Wild Folk count shadows very unlucky. From then until it is over, tooth may not crop without singing, nor foot step there without dancing."

"Yes," finished the lady mouse. "So we take our children there until they have danced three turns. After that they never forget it. But we don't like to let them eat. Singing is unlucky for a mouse. But dancing is so delightful."

"It looks so," said Nibble soberly, "but no rabbit can dance until he grows a tail."

"Gracious," said the lady mouse. "I'd forgotten you hadn't—a regular one." When she saw Nibble's feelings weren't hurt, she asked, "Do you mind telling us why?"

“Certainly not,” Nibble assured her. “It happened back when the world was young and the new creatures were choosing where they would live. Some chose the mountains and some the plains, some the sea and some the air. But my great-great-great-great—I can’t know how many greats I ought to use—grandfather sat back on his elegant fluffy tail and wondered about it.

“Right near him sat a queer, snaky-looking animal. He had pricked up ears and a bushy tail but his voice was a hissy whisper. He was talking to a crowd of beasts and birds and they couldn’t take their eyes off him. No wonder, for the things he said made my great-grandfather’s ears stiff just to listen to.

“Mother Nature came by and she was very busy. ‘Speak up, you with the tall ears,’ she said. ‘Where do you choose?’

“‘Please,’ said my great-grandfather, ‘I don’t choose at all yet. I just want to live on the earth until I see what these things are eating.’

“‘Oh, ho!’ remarked Mother Nature, looking at him very hard. ‘You see with more than your ears. And what are you eating your own self?’

“‘A nibble here and a nibble there,’ answered my great-grandfather, ‘but I take nothing that will not be again as it was before.’

“‘Good!’ said Mother Nature. ‘Make your choice when you please and it shall be as you wish.’ Then she turned to those others near him. ‘Who are you?’ she asked the strange-looking one, ‘and where do you choose?’

“‘I’m the Weasel,’ he answered. ‘I came up from under the earth.’

“‘Ah,’ sighed Mother Nature, ‘I knew some of you would get here. But choose.’

“‘I shall live anywhere I can lay my foot,’ announced the Weasel boldly. ‘And I shall eat fish, flesh and fowl, whatever I can catch.’ And the other beasts all nodded at one another.

“‘For hunger?’ asked Mother Nature. And most of her beasts who had been listening to the Weasel answered, ‘For hunger,’ because they thought it was the thing to do.

“‘For the joy of killing!’ snarled the Weasel. ‘Like this—’ And he sprang at my great-grandfather.

“‘But my great-grandfather gave a mighty leap. He landed in a briar patch and began racing through it. And all the briars called, ‘He chooses us—a beast has chosen us. Catch him! Hold him!’ and they caught him by his tall ears and elegant fluffy tail so hard that they stopped him short.

“‘Let me go,’ he begged. ‘Please let me go. The Weasel will kill me.’

“‘Then the briars cried until the tears dripped from their twigs. ‘Nobody wants us,’ they sobbed. ‘Please choose us. If you lay back your ears and shorten your tail we’ll never stop you. We’ll shelter you from the summer sun and the winter wind. We’ll warn you of your enemies and bar your path

behind you. We'll serve you as long as you let us.'

"And just then my great-grandfather thought he could hear the Weasel very close, so he cried despairingly. 'I'll choose the Pickery Things.' Down dropped his ears, up shrunk his tail, and away he ran. But we've never been sorry. The Pickery Things have kept their word."

"Dear me, how interesting!" said the lady mouse when Nibble Rabbit had finished. "But could you have your long tail back if you wanted to?"

"It might be managed," said Nibble. "Mother Nature said it wasn't fair for the Weasel to begin living before the other things had all made up their minds. He really frightened my great-grandfather into making that choice. And it really wasn't fair of the briars to hold him. But Mother Nature advised us to try it until we were sure we wanted our tails back again and then let her know. She didn't actually promise to give them, as I remember," he added honestly.

And then a commotion broke loose in the little cornstalk tent where Nibble's party were hiding from the Terrible Storm. "Why don't you grow one? What kind do you want? Try one like mine! Or mine!!" shouted all the voices until even Nibble's long ears couldn't hold all the noise.

"Your long leaps are almost like flying," said the Partridge. "We couldn't steer without our tails."

"Yes, and then you could balance yourself in the trees," advised Chatter Squirrel.

"Or hold on by it as we do," said a wise old mouse.

"My cousin lost hers," murmured Gimlet, shaking his red Woodpecker's cap very seriously. "And she nearly starved before it grew out again. She couldn't sit comfortably on a tree-trunk without it."

"A tail," squeaked the bats who hadn't been heard from since they hung themselves up from the roof, "a tail is the handiest pocket in the world. You use it for flies in summer and to warm your paws in winter. Do have one."

"I do use mine," said Nibble laughing, "but not for any of the reasons you give. I flash mine so any rabbit behind me can tell whether it's safe to follow me. Why, my mother never bothered to talk as long as she knew I could see her tail." And he showed them how he could make the little white puff underneath it show and disappear.

"Well, I never thought it was any good at all," marvelled Chatter.

"Another thing," said Nibble. "Ours was no more use than Tad Coon's. Just a great big brush to carry around. All you could possibly do with it was warm your feet. And we never slept half the year like Tad does, so where would be the use of that?"

"But Tad Coon's was useful once," argued Chatter. "His old great-aunt wanted to go on a pilgrimage early one spring. But the water was high in the marsh and she was so fat and crippled with age that she couldn't swim. So Tad would go down every morning and stick in his tail to show her how deep it was. There would be a brown mark where the mud came and a white mark where the water

washed it off above. Every morning the rings would be lower until there was only a little black mud stain on the very tip of it. Then she started off and all the black she got was a little on the very soles of her feet.”

“And he never bothered to wash it clean again,” said Nibble, “so you see how little use it is to him.”

“You’re just jealous,” giggled the lady mouse. “That puff you wear is no bigger than the fuzz off a pussywillow.” And then Chatter Squirrel and Gimlet the Woodpecker and the Partridge all tried their best to make Nibble say that even if he didn’t own a real tail he’d like to try one.

Which of course he wouldn’t. For no decent rabbit would go back on his great-grandfather’s bargain with the Pickery Things. “No,” he insisted, “I truly wouldn’t know what to do with one at all. If it dragged, my gawky legs would stumble on it. If it stood up, my floppy ears would get tangled in it. I guess I’d have to walk like this—” And he limped across the dancing floor pretending to get all mixed up in a tail that wouldn’t get out of the way. He tripped on it and he kicked it and at last he pretended to pick it up in his mouth and carry it.

Chatter Squirrel laughed until his feet danced under him. As for the lady mouse she simply squeaked with joy. But the bats, who live in the woods and sleep all day couldn’t understand. And they were very serious about it. A bat hasn’t any fun in him at all.

“He’s got a tail,” said one, peering at Nibble.

“Of course,” answered the other sleepily, not troubling to open his eyes to look. “Everything’s got a tail, Fish, Bird or Beast. They couldn’t get on without one. It stands to reason.”

“How about frogs?” demanded Gimlet sharply. “They haven’t any.”

Now the bat had never particularly noticed a frog. But you couldn’t fool him. “He’s got one,” he answered cheerfully. “Only sensible folks keep it folded up under them like we do. Quite proper, too. One that drags is so untidy.”

“Untidy!” snapped the lady mouse. “What do you call one with a skin pocket like yours, all cluttered up with fly-wings, Eh?”

“Oh, but he hasn’t,” said Gimlet, and Nibble echoed, “No, truly he hasn’t.”

“Then he’s not Fish, Bird, or Beast!” repeated the sleepy bat. “It stands to reason.” And the other creatures looked at each other curiously, for they didn’t know what to say.

“He isn’t Fish, Bird, or Beast, is he?” fluttered a partridge. And the bat nodded as though he knew it all the time.

“All right,” agreed Chatter cheerfully. “But how about Man?”

“Man?” shouted Nibble and the mice and the partridge all together. For this was news! When the Woodsfolk see a man they don’t stop to look at him; they run and hide. And Nibble had never even got a glimpse of one yet. Neither had the bats. But the sleepy bat just kept on insisting, “He’s neither

Fish, Bird, nor Beast, if he hasn't a tail."

"Then what is he?" demanded Chatter. He thought he had asked something the bat couldn't answer.

"What does he wear?" said the bat.

And now it was Chatter who didn't know what to say. For a Man doesn't wear scales or feathers or fur. "I think he wears a skin—like a frog," he said at last.

"I told you so!" And the bat nodded away more conceitedly than ever. And nothing the others could say made any difference.

"But he's not green," objected Chatter. "And he doesn't hop. He's ever so much bigger, and he's tan, like your vest, Nibble, or pink, like the inside of your mouth." Chatter had seen the little boys at the swimming-hole and some of them must have been sunburned.

"Now isn't that queer," remarked a partridge. "The one we saw seemed all brown and wrinkly and shelly, like Grandpop Snappingturtle. And he made a noise like a Summer Storm." She meant a man in a shooting-coat who fired a gun.

"Nothing queer about," announced Gimlet cheerfully. Gimlet knows more than all the rest of them because he works for the man in the Orchard and is on very good terms with the whole Man tribe. "They come in as many shapes and sizes and colours as flowers." You see Gimlet doesn't know the difference between men and women and children. "They make as many different noises as all of us put together and do as many different things."

"I'm going to take a good long look at the first man I see," said Nibble. "I will, if I know him when I see him. That's the only way I'll ever understand what you've been talking about."

"Don't do it," shouted all the others. "Keep away from Man! Keep away from Man! He's more dangerous than Silvertip!"

Source:

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