

Why the Cow Got Her Horns

by John Breck

“Exactly! Way back when the world was new,” began Chirp Sparrow. And then he stopped to squirm himself into a bunch of hay right beside Nibble Rabbit, so the wind wouldn’t muss his feathers, while he was talking. And Nibble crept to the very mouth of the hole in the bottom of the haystack where he was hiding, and sat on his toes and was very happy and comfortable.

“Away back when the world was new the cows and wolves began to have trouble.”

“Because the wolves chose to eat them, like the weasel chose to eat my great-great-grandfather?” interrupted Nibble excitedly.

“Not in the very first-off beginning,” said Chirp. “You see, the weasel was one of those who came up from under the Earth-that-was-common-to-all. He wasn’t one of Mother Nature’s own things. But the wolf was. He was just a little too clever, but she liked him and trusted him—more than most.

“Mother Nature had made a bargain with the plants. The beasts were to eat them. But she promised the plants that they wouldn’t die, but would spring up again stronger than ever. She would send the rain to keep them from getting thirsty, and they would put their roots into the Earth-that-was-common-to-all and get their food from it, and the winds were to keep their house swept clean and play with them, and the trees were to shade them from the hot sun and sing to them, so that they would be perfectly contented. And the beasts were to graze on them and the birds were to eat part of their seeds—but not all—so they were contented, too.

“Mother Nature got about half the earth in fine working order. Then she gave the rain and the wind orders and went down south, over the Far Horizon to look after the other half.

“Right away the wicked little raindrops went to playing in the brooks and leading them into no end of mischief. And the winds went up and played tag with each other on the mountain-tops. And the Sun got curious to know what Mother Nature was doing with the other half of the earth, because that was coming out all different, so he kept edging farther and farther south until by and by, he wasn’t paying any attention to the north half at all. And things went awfully wrong in the north half.

“Awfully wrong! The plants down in the brook bottoms cried: ‘We’re drowning! We’re drowning! If the wind and the sun don’t do their part we won’t be eaten.’ So they turned themselves into bulrushes and all kinds of tough, stringy things that can stand wet feet, but nothing in the world can eat them. And the plants on the higher lands cried: ‘We’re strangling! We haven’t had a drink in ever so long, and our backs are so stiff from standing still we’ll never be able to play again. If the rain and the wind don’t do their part we won’t be eaten!’ So they hid down in their roots under the Earth-that-is-common-to-all, most discouraged, and left only their skeletons standing. And the beasts starved. Especially the poor cows. But the wolves kept very fat. Only they weren’t telling any one how they managed it.

“And Mother Nature was almost through down south and getting ready to come north again. So the Sun hurried back to get busy. And the rain poured to make up for lost time, and the winds rushed down from the mountain tops, but their fingers were all cold, so they made things worse than ever. And

the beasts were all cold, 'specially the cows." Chirp stopped to stretch his wing.

"Please go on, Mr. Chirp," pleaded Nibble. He was so excited and impatient! "Please get to the part about the wolves!"

"I will," promised Chirp Sparrow. "Only these birds must settle down and be quiet. They get me all fluttered." For every sparrow on the haystack was coming down close to the hole in the bottom where Nibble Rabbit was sitting. No one wanted to miss hearing about it.

"Well, Mother Nature came back," Chirp went on. "And, my, but wasn't she angry! Just wasn't she? She said to the rain: 'I don't believe you've rained a drop since I've been gone or you wouldn't be carrying on at this rate. Do you call this a shower? It's a flood—and it's perfectly disgraceful.' Then she turned to the wind. 'Do you think I don't know where you've been?' she scolded. 'I can feel how cold your fingers are. Look how you've ruffled up the fur on my poor chilly beasts there!' And she snapped at the Sun: 'You needn't look so good. Stop smiling and listen to me. Do you think I didn't know where you were? Peeking right over my shoulder. You nearly burned a hole in the back of my neck when I was finishing up that last armadillo. You three have made a pretty mess of things. And I did so want one world where there wasn't any winter!' She nearly sat down and cried over it all, she was so disappointed.

"But, of course she hadn't time. She had to put things back in order. First she coaxed the plants to begin growing again. Then she called the beasts so she could look them all over and see what she could do for them.

"And the cows came crawling up, as slow, as slow, with their poor bones all sticking out—but the wolves were fat as butter.

"And the cows said, 'We've been so starvation hungry that we've worn our teeth right off.' And so they had. And their teeth are still worn off, right to this day.

"And the wolves whimpered: 'We've been so starvation hungry, too!'

"But Mother Nature looked at their fat sides and she said: 'Show me your teeth.'

"And their teeth were perfectly sharp and new. And they still are.

"So Mother Nature frowned at them until they cringed. And they trembled so hard that their very claws clattered. For they knew that they had misbehaved and something serious would come of it. Then she asked: 'What have you been eating?'

"Just dead beasts that we found lying about,' they whined.

"Mother Nature looked at the poor cows, but the cows wouldn't tell on the wicked wolves. Only they scratched the earth with their feet and sent it flying over their shoulders the way they do when they're angry. Then she said: 'Cows will always be angry with you like that because they smell the blood on you. Oh, wolves, it is bad to lie, but it is terrible to kill!'

"Of course the wolves knew that they had been found out, so they tried to look brave and answered: 'We are too clever to starve like a stupid cow.'

“But Mother Nature shook her head sadly. ‘You’ll find that it’s better to be good and stupid than to be bad and clever. But bad and clever you will be to the end of all wolves, and the stupid cow will live to see the last of you. Cows, how shall I punish them?’

“Then the cows roared like a raging river: ‘Give us back our teeth and we’ll do it ourselves!’

“‘I can’t do that,’ she explained, ‘because nothing that has been lived can be done over again, but I can give you something newer and longer and sharper than the teeth of any wolf.’

“It was horns.”

“Is that all?” demanded Nibble Rabbit.

“All?” echoed Chirp Sparrow, cocking his head on one side. “Isn’t that enough?” But he was really very much flattered. For Nibble’s ears had stood straight up right through his story, and all the other sparrows on the haystack were saying, “Hush, hush!” so he would go on again.

“My beak!” Chirp exclaimed. “I’ve told you how winter came to be, because the sun and the wind and the rain didn’t behave while Mother Nature left this half of the earth to go down and start the other half. I’ve told you how the good stupid cows starved because the plants wouldn’t be eaten, and how the bad clever wolves took to eating the cows. And how Mother Nature gave them horns that were longer and sharper than the tooth of any wolf to make it up to them. What more do you want to know?”

“Lots of things,” insisted Nibble. “Why did that cow shout ‘Wolf’! at Silvertip?”

“Because she’s a cow. Too good and stupid to know the difference! Wolf, fox, or dog, it’s all the same family, only the fox is smaller, and cleverer—and wicked— and the dog is the cleverest of all. But the cows didn’t make much use of their horns after they did get them, because they are so stupid.

“They say Mother Nature was sorrier over the wickedness of the wolves than over any of the rest because she trusted them more than most,” he went on. “You see, they were her own beasts, not like the weasel who came up from under the earth and was wicked from the very first.”

“Were lots of others bad, too?” demanded Nibble. “Bad things are always interesting, you know.

“Oh, yes. Even some of the birds.” Chirp said this as though it were the most wicked thing in the world for a bird to be bad. “But we weren’t. We’ve always been as good as good, no matter how much trouble we have with the hawks and the owls. We eat some seeds, but not all, and the bugs. Bugs come from under the earth, you know, and the plants hate them. But we didn’t have to ask for horns or claws to take care of ourselves—that’s because we’re so clever.” And he spread his lively little wings, with brown edges to every feather, and squinted conceitedly at them over his shoulder.

“And the mice?” added Nibble. He didn’t want birds to have all the credit.

“Mice, indeed!” chirped the sparrow, quite sharply. “Mice! Why, do you know what they did? They sneaked down under the earth and nibbled the very roots of the plants when they tried to hide under the Earth-that-was-common-to-all. And that was the meanest trick! It took Mother Nature half through the first spring to find out what they had been doing. Some were so ashamed of it that they

stayed right there and got to be moles. But some of them pretended they just didn't know any better."

Nibble felt a bit flustered because he does it, too, and so does Doctor Muskrat. But then the quail and the sleek brown thrasher are just as bad, so he didn't try to say anything. Fortunately Chirp went right on talking.

"The wickedest creature of all," he said, "is Ouphe the Rat. He's so horrid and dirty and disgusting that he eats even his own kind. He's a cannibal! Everything hates him, whether it wears feathers or fur or scales—even the stupid cow. And he hates everything. He comes sneaking and creeping just when you least expect him, and—"

"Cheep!" went the watch bird of the flock. "Cheep!" echoed their voices and flutter went their lively little wings with brown edges to every feather. And Ouphe squeaked with rage because he'd missed them that time.

"You will talk about me!" he snarled. "You will, will you? Wait till you hatch and I'll crunch your baby birds' bones for you." He clashed his yellow fangs horribly.

Source:

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