

Nibble Fools Ouphe in his Own Haystack

by John Breck

The little rabbit crouched down in the bole in the bottom of the haystack not three feet away from the wicked rat. But Ouphe hadn't seen him. He was sure of it because Ouphe kept squalling at the sparrows all the nastiest things he could put his tongue to. And the sparrows, swinging from a branch of the elm tree that leaned above him, weren't much more polite.

“Swapping lies with the field-mice, were you?” sneered Ouphe. “I'll attend to them.”

“It wasn't lies,” shrieked Chirp Sparrow indignantly. “Didn't you come sneaking and creeping—just the way you always do? Thought you'd climb up the other side of the stack and surprise us when we weren't expecting you, didn't you? And isn't that exactly what I said? Let me tell you, you're one thing we always do expect. You'll maybe catch us when you learn to fly—but not before.”

“I'll catch you when I clean out these tattle-tales of field-mice,” snapped Ouphe, and he gnashed his teeth until the froth made his whiskers white.

“It wasn't the field-mice, Smarty! They never said a word. It was your own scaly tail that told on you.” Chirp spread his wings, opened his beak and stuck out his tongue at the wicked old beast. And Ouphe lashed his own tattling tail in an awful rage.

“It wasn't the field-mice, was it?” he snarled. “Then who were you talking to? I'll slit your gossiping throat for you!”

And right about then Nibble decided it was time to move. But he didn't try to run. You see, Ouphe would have pounced on him. He turned softly around and slipped into the stack behind him.

And a queer place he found himself in. For the whole bottom of the hay was tunneled with holes. They went this way and that, twisting and turning until he lost himself entirely. And they were a tight fit for even a little rabbit to creep through. And dark! My, but that place was dark and scary—it was the darkest place Nibble had ever seen, darker even than a night when there isn't any moon! And stuffy! For besides the sweet smell of the clover there was a horrible smothery weaselly one.

Pretty soon something caught his foot and he was so scared he gave a little “Ow!” But it was only a piece of wire and he soon got free again. All the same he heard a tiny scratch beside him which scared him more than ever.

Right then a voice, even tinier than the scratch, whispered, “Who's there!”

“Nibble Rabbit!” he whispered back.

“A rabbit!” exclaimed the voice, “I knew I smelled one. Whatever are you doing here? This is where Ouphe the Rat lives when he's at home.”

At that Nibble gave a little jump. But he just struck the top of the tunnel and pricked his soft, lopy ear in the hay. So he went back to crawling, all blind and scared in the blackness, trying to stifle

his snuffles and tasting the salt tears that rolled down his nose. And all around him he seemed to see the long yellow teeth and the frothy whiskers of Ouphe, parted in a wicked grin.

Suddenly he struck something small and soft. And the tiny voice whispered: "Take my tail in your mouth and follow me. But don't bite too hard."

Nibble Rabbit opened his mouth and caught hold of a slim thing, like a little round stalk of grass, that was tickling his eyebrows. And he knew it was a field-mouse's tail. It twitched as her little feet started running through the inky black tunnels Ouphe the Rat had made for himself. And the way she turned and twisted made Nibble afraid she didn't know for sure just where she was going. It was no wonder that he had got lost among them!

But he scrambled along behind her as fast as he could. And at last they made a sharp turn and Nibble could see the snow outside glistening in the sun. My, how nice it seemed when he reached it, though it made his eyes blink. And when he tried to thank the field-mouse she had disappeared.

He crept around the edge of the haystack, looking for where his tracks led into it, so he could follow them back to the Woods again. At the second corner he caught sight of the sparrows, still swinging in the elm tree, just as he had left them before he hid in Ouphe's own hole. Of course he waited to hear whether Ouphe were still on that side of the stack. Nibble didn't want to be chased by him.

And right then Chirp sang out, "It was a rabbit we were talking to. He's been sitting there all the while in that hole below you."

Nibble simply couldn't believe his ears. It sounded as though Chirp wanted Ouphe to get him. But Chirp knew what he was doing. For he flashed "Wait!" with two white feathers in his tail. Chirp knows a thing or two, if he is conceited, and he signalled so plainly any rabbit would know what he meant by it. But a rat wouldn't.

You ought to have seen the change that came over Ouphe. He quickly cleaned his whiskers and began to talk as though he had honey in his throat. "What? A rabbit? Why, Mr. Sparrow, how could you keep me here playing jokes when I had a visitor? That was very unkind of you. I must invite him in and make him at home."

He said it so Nibble wouldn't be afraid of him and begin to run. Because then he'd have a fine hunt through all those twisty black tunnels to find him. But Nibble knew mighty well that he was only pretending. When he snarled out that he'd "slit Chirp's throat" and "crunch the bones of his baby birds" Ouphe had meant every wicked word of it.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Chirp. "You're so funny, Mr. Ouphe, we don't quite know how to take you. That rabbit just stepped inside when he heard you invite him. I saw his tail."

"Wait for me, Mr. Rabbit," said Ouphe in his sticky, sweet voice, "I'd like to eat with you. And we'll invite my dear little friends the field-mice too." He said that because he knew perfectly well Nibble had heard him call them "tattle-tales." And he thumped down right into Nibble's rabbit tracks where they went into the stack.

"All safe. Come ahead!" flashed Chirp. And he actually winked those tail-feathers. So Nibble

bounced out and made some more tracks in the nice crunchy snow. But they went away from where Ouphe was hunting crossly through his black tunnels under the hay.

“Ka-runch-it, ka-runch-it!” sang his furry feet in the crispy snow, running away from Ouphe the Rat and his haystack. “Ka-flick-it, ka-flick-it!” twiddled his puffy tail as he passed under the elm branch where the sparrows were chuckling to themselves. That was his “Thank you.”

“I’d better not talk,” thought Nibble, “for fear Ouphe might hear me. All the same I call Chirp Sparrow pretty smart. He waited until he saw I’d come safely through Ouphe’s scary dark tunnels under the hay and then he sent Ouphe in there to look for me while I skip off. Only I wish I’d thanked that field-mouse who showed me the way out of Ouphe’s holes. I’ll do something for her some day.” And he did. You wait and see.

Source:

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