

Why Peter Rabbit Cannot Fold His Hands

by Thornton W. Burgess

Happy Jack Squirrel sat with his hands folded across his white waistcoat. He is very fond of sitting with his hands folded that way. A little way from him sat Peter Rabbit. Peter was sitting up very straight, but his hands dropped right down in front. Happy Jack noticed it.

"Why don't you fold your hands the way I do, Peter Rabbit?" shouted Happy Jack.

"I—I—don't want to," stammered Peter.

"You mean you can't!" jeered Happy Jack.

Peter pretended not to hear, and a few minutes later he hopped away towards the dear Old Briar-patch, lipperty-lipperty-lip. Happy Jack watched him go, and there was a puzzled look in Happy Jack's eyes.

"I really believe he can't fold his hands," said Happy Jack to himself, but speaking aloud.

"He can't, and none of his family can," said a gruff voice.

Happy Jack turned to find Old Mr. Toad sitting in the Lone Little Path.

"Why not?" asked Happy Jack.

"Ask Grandfather Frog; he knows," replied Old Mr. Toad, and started on about his business.

And this is how it happens that Grandfather Frog told this story to the little meadow and forest people gathered around him on the bank of the Smiling Pool.

"Chug-a-rum!" said Grandfather Frog. "Old Mr. Rabbit, the grandfather a thousand times removed of Peter Rabbit, was always getting into trouble. Yes, Sir, old Mr. Rabbit was always getting into trouble. Seemed like he wouldn't be happy if he couldn't get into trouble. It was all because he was so dreadfully curious about other people's business, just as Peter Rabbit is now. It seemed that he was just born to be curious and so, of course, to get into trouble.

"One day word came to the Green Forest and to the Green Meadows that Old Mother Nature was coming to see how all the little meadow and forest people were getting along, to settle all the little troubles and fusses between them, and to find out who were and who were not obeying the orders she had given them when she had visited them last. My, my, my, such a hurrying and scurrying and worrying as there was! You see, everybody wanted to look his best when Old Mother Nature arrived, Yes, Sir, everybody wanted to look his best.

"There was the greatest changing of clothes you ever did see. Old King Bear put on his blackest coat. Mr. Coon and Mr. Mink and Mr. Otter sat up half the night brushing their suits and making them look as fine and handsome as they could. Even Old Mr. Toad put on a new suit under his old one, and planned to pull the old one off and throw it away as soon as Old Mother Nature should arrive. Then

everybody began to fix up their homes and make them as neat and nice as they knew how—everybody but Mr. Rabbit.

"Now Mr. Rabbit was lazy. He didn't like to work any more than Peter Rabbit does now. No, Sir, old Mr. Rabbit was afraid of work. The very sight of work scared old Mr. Rabbit. You see, he was so busy minding other people's business that he didn't have time to attend to his own. So his brown and gray coat always was rumped and tumbled and dirty. His house was a tumble-down affair in which no one but Mr. Rabbit would ever have thought of living, and his garden—oh, dear me, such a garden you never did see! It was all weeds and brambles. They filled up the yard, and old Mr. Rabbit actually couldn't have gotten into his own house if he hadn't cut a path through the brambles.

"Now when old Mr. Rabbit heard that Old Mother Nature was coming, his heart sank way, way down, for he knew just how angry she would be when she saw his house, his garden and his shabby suit.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What shall I do?" wailed Mr. Rabbit, wringing his hands.

"Get busy and clean up," advised Mr. Woodchuck, hurrying about his own work.

"Now Mr. Woodchuck was a worker and very, very neat. He meant to have his home looking just as fine as he could make it. He brought up some clean yellow sand from deep down in the ground and sprinkled it smoothly over his doorstep.

"I'll help you, if I get through my own work in time," shouted Mr. Woodchuck over his shoulder.

"That gave Mr. Rabbit an idea. He would ask all his neighbors to help him, and perhaps then he could get his house and garden in order by the time Old Mother Nature arrived. So Mr. Rabbit called on Mr. Skunk and Mr. Coon and Mr. Mink and Mr. Squirrel and Mr. Chipmunk, and all the rest of his neighbors, telling them of his trouble and asking them to help. Now, in spite of the trouble Mr. Rabbit was forever making for other people by his dreadful curiosity and meddling with other people's affairs, all his neighbors had a warm place in their hearts for Mr. Rabbit, and they all promised that they would help him as soon as they had their own work finished.

"Instead of hurrying home and getting to work himself, Mr. Rabbit stopped a while after each call and sat with his arms folded, watching the one he was calling on work. Mr. Rabbit was very fond of sitting with folded arms. It was very comfortable. But this was no time to be doing it, and Mr. Skunk told him so.

"If you want the rest of us to help you, you'd better get things started yourself," said old Mr. Skunk, carefully combing out his big, plummy tail.

"That's right, Mr. Skunk! That's right!" said Mr. Rabbit, starting along briskly, just as if he was going to hurry right home and begin work that very instant.

But half an hour later, when Mr. Skunk happened to pass the home of Mr. Chipmunk, there sat Mr. Rabbit with his arms folded, watching Mr. Chipmunk hurrying about as only Mr. Chipmunk can.

"Finally Mr. Rabbit had made the round of all his friends and neighbors, and he once more reached his tumble-down house. 'Oh, dear,' sighed Mr. Rabbit, as he looked at the tangle of brambles which almost hid the little old house, 'I never, never can clear away all this! It will be a lot easier to

work when all my friends are here to help,' So he sighed once more and folded his arms, instead of beginning work as he should have done. And then, because the sun was bright and warm, and he was very, very comfortable, old Mr. Rabbit began to nod, and presently he was fast asleep.

"Now Old Mother Nature likes to take people by surprise, and it happened that she chose this very day to make her promised visit. She was greatly pleased with all she saw as she went along, until she came to the home of Mr. Rabbit.

"'Mercy me!' exclaimed Old Mother Nature, throwing up her hands as she saw the tumble-down house almost hidden by the brambles and weeds. 'Can it be possible that any one really lives here?'

Then, peering through the tangle of brambles, she spied old Mr. Rabbit sitting on his broken-down doorstep with his arms folded and fast asleep.

"At first she was very indignant, oh, very indignant, indeed! She decided that Mr. Rabbit should be punished very severely. But as she watched him sitting there, dreaming in the warm sunshine, her anger began to melt away. The fact is, Old Mother Nature was like all the rest of Mr. Rabbit's neighbors—she just couldn't help loving happy-go-lucky Mr. Rabbit in spite of all his faults. With a long stick she reached in and tickled the end of his nose.

"Mr. Rabbit sneezed, and this made him wake up. He yawned and blinked, and then his eyes suddenly flew wide open with fright. He had discovered Old Mother Nature frowning at him. She pointed a long forefinger at him and said:

'In every single blessed day
There's time for work and time for play.
Who folds his arms with work undone
Doth cheat himself and spoil his fun.'

"'Hereafter, Mr. Rabbit, you and your children and your children's children will never again be able to sit with folded arms until you or they have learned to work.'

"And that is why Peter Rabbit cannot fold his arms and still lives in a tumble-down house among the brambles," concluded Grandfather Frog.

Source:

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