

Where Mr. Quack Got His Webbed Feet

by Thornton W. Burgess

Twice every year, in the early spring and in the late fall, Peter Rabbit watches the Smiling Pool with a great deal of eagerness. Can you guess why? It is because two very good friends of Peter's are in the habit of stopping there for a few days for rest and refreshment before continuing the long journey which they are obliged to make. They are Mr. and Mrs. Quack, the Mallard Ducks. Peter is very fond of them, and when the time for their arrival draws near, Peter watches for them with a great deal of anxiety. You see they have told him something of the terrible dangers which they always encounter on these long journeys, and so Peter is always afraid that something terrible may have happened to them, and it is a great relief when he finds them swimming about in the Smiling Pool.

One reason Peter is so fond of Mr. and Mrs. Quack is because they always have a story for him. Sometimes it is a story of adventure, a tale of terrible danger and narrow escapes. Sometimes it is about their home in the far Northland, and again it is about the wonderful Southland where they spend the winter. But the story that Peter likes best is the one about where and how the Quack family got their funny, webbed feet. Mr. Quack doesn't think those feet funny at all, but Peter does. He never grows tired of watching Mr. and Mrs. Quack use them, because, you know, they are used so differently from other feet. And always he goes back to the dear Old Briar-patch with renewed admiration for the wisdom of Old Mother Nature.

Peter noticed those feet the first time he met Mr. and Mrs. Quack. He couldn't help but notice them. It happened that Mr. and Mrs. Quack were out on the bank of the Smiling Pool as Peter came hurrying over in his usual way, lipperty-lipperty-lip. They heard him coming and not knowing at first who it was they at once started for the water. Peter never will forget the funny way in which they waddled. He never had seen anybody quite so awkward. But when they reached the water he forgot to laugh. He simply stared open-mouthed in astonishment. You see there they were as graceful as they had been awkward on land. Afterward, when Peter had become acquainted with them and they were the best of friends, he ventured to speak of their queer feet.

"Do you know," said he, "you have the most interesting feet of anybody I know of. They are so broad that the first time I saw them I couldn't believe my own eyes. I didn't suppose anybody had such broad feet. I suppose there is some special reason why they are so broad and why your legs are so short. Do you know how Mother Nature happened to give you feet so different from the feet of other birds, Mr. Quack?"

Mr. Quack chuckled. "I tell you what it is, Peter," said he, "if you'll tell me why it is you have such long hind legs and such a funny short tail, I'll tell you why it is that Mrs. Quack and I have such broad feet, though I must confess that I don't see anything odd about them."

Peter agreed at once. He told Mr. and Mrs. Quack all about what happened to his grandfather a thousand times removed, the very first Rabbit, way back when the world was young, and how ever since then all Rabbits have had long hind legs and short tails. When he had finished Mr. Quack thoughtfully scratched his handsome green head, looked at his reflection in the Smiling Pool to make sure that he was looking his very best, looked behind to see that the feathers in the tip of his tail had the proper curl, and then gazed off over the Green Meadows with a far-away look in his eyes as if he were looking way back to the time he was to tell about. At last, just as Peter Rabbit was beginning to lose

patience Mr. Quack began.

"It must be, Peter," said he, "that my great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather lived just about the same time as your great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather, way back in the days when the world was young. Perhaps they knew each other. Perhaps they were acquainted just as you and I are now. Anyway, according to what has been handed down in the family, Grandfather Quack was very much such a looking fellow as I am now, except in the matter of his bill and feet. His bill was not broad like mine but more like the bills of other birds, and his feet were like the feet of Mr. Grouse and Bob White. They were made for scratching, and there was nothing between the toes. You see, Old Mother Nature was experimenting. She made everybody a little different from everybody else and then started them forth in the Great World to shift for themselves and to find out what they really needed that they hadn't got.

"Old Mr. Quack, my great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather, soon discovered one thing, and that was that his legs were too short for him to get around very fast. When he walked, everybody laughed at him. When he tried to run, they laughed harder than ever. He didn't mind this so very much, though he did a little. Nobody likes to be laughed at, especially when it is because of something they cannot help. But what he did mind was the fact that his neighbors could run about so much faster than he that they got all the best of the food, and quite often he went hungry.

"One day he happened to be sitting on the bank of the Smiling Pool, thinking the matter over and wondering what he had best do, when Mr. Fox stole up behind him and startled him so that he lost his balance and tumbled down the bank into the water. This frightened him more than ever, and he flapped about and squawked and squawked and flapped until Mr. Fox nearly split his sides laughing at him. And when he was quite out of breath, Mr. Quack discovered that he was making all this fuss for nothing. He didn't sink, but floated on the water, and what was more the water didn't get under his feathers at all. When he tried to walk, of course he couldn't, and he had a funny feeling because his feet didn't touch anything and felt so very useless. But he kept moving them back and forth, and pretty soon he discovered that he moved ahead. Of course he moved very slowly, because his feet were not made for use in the water, but he moved, and that was enough. He knew then that he could get back to land. Then he tried his wings and he found that he could rise into the air from the water quite as easily as from the land. Right then and there all fear of the water left him. In fact, he liked it.

"Little by little, Grandfather Quack began to understand that he had made a great discovery. He had discovered the safest place in all the Great World for him. Out on the water he was safe from Mr. Fox and Mr. Wolf and all the other four-footed hunters. So he took to spending most of his time on the water or near it. When he wanted a nap, he would hide among the rushes that grew in the water. 'If only I didn't have to leave the water for food!' sighed Grandfather Quack. 'If only I could find food here, I would never leave the water.'

"At the time he was squatting at the very edge of the Smiling Pool. Presently he noticed a funny water bug crawling on the bottom where the water was only an inch or two deep. 'I wonder if that fellow is good to eat,' thought he, and almost without thinking he plunged his head under water and caught the bug. It was good. Grandfather Quack at once started to look for more, and while doing this he discovered that there were a great many seeds from the rushes scattered about in the mud at the bottom of the Smiling Pool, and that these also were good to eat. Then quite by accident he got hold of a tender root in the mud and found that this was especially good.

"This was enough for Grandfather Quack. He had found that he could get plenty to eat without leaving the Smiling Pool. Moreover, he didn't have to share it with anybody, because there was no one

else who thought of looking for food there. He knew when he was well off. So Grandfather Quack grew fat and was happy. The only things that bothered him were the slowness with which he had to pick up seeds, one at a time, and the slowness with which he could paddle about, for you couldn't really call it swimming. But in spite of these things he was happy and made the best of his lot.

"One day he tugged and tugged at a root with his head under water. When at last he had to bring his head up for a breath, whom should he discover but Old Mother Nature watching him from the opposite bank. 'Come over here, Mr. Quack, and tell me all about it,' she commanded.

"Grandfather Quack started across the Smiling Pool, but because his feet were not made for swimming, it took him a long time to get there. Old Mother Nature smiled as she watched him. 'You look better on the water than you do on land,' said she. 'In fact, I believe that is just where you belong. Now tell me how you happened to take to the water.'

"Grandfather Quack told her the whole story and how Old Mother Nature did laugh when he described how frightened he was when he fell in that time. Suddenly she reached out and caught him by the bill. 'I don't think much of that bill for poking about in the mud,' said she. 'How will this do?' She let go, and Grandfather Quack found he had a broad bill just suited for getting food out of the mud. Then Old Mother Nature bade him hold forth first one foot and then the other. Between the toes she stretched a tough skin clear to the toe nails. 'Now let me see you swim,' said she.

"Grandfather Quack tried. He kicked one foot and then the other, and to his great joy he shot along swiftly. When he drew his feet back for another kick his toes closed together, and so his feet came through the water easily. But when he kicked back they were wide spread, and the skin between them pushed against the water, and drove him ahead. It was wonderful! It was splendid! He hurried over to Old Mother Nature, and with tears of joy in his eyes he thanked her. And from that day to this members of my family have had the same broad bills and webbed feet, and have lived on the water," concluded Mr. Quack.

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