

When Old Mr. Badger Learned to Stay at Home

by Thornton W. Burgess

The first time Peter Rabbit saw Digger the Badger, he laughed at him. Yes, Sir, Peter laughed at him. He laughed until he had to hold his sides. When he got back to the dear Old Briar-patch, he told little Mrs. Peter all about Digger. That is, he told her all that he had seen, which was really very little indeed about Digger, as he found out later.

"I found him away over on the Green Meadows in a place where I have never been before, and I almost stepped on him before I saw him. You should have seen me jump. I guess it is lucky I did, too, for he certainly has got the wickedest-looking teeth, and I didn't like the way he snarled. Then at a safe distance I sat down and laughed. I just had to. Why, his legs are so short and his coat hangs down so on each side that he doesn't seem to have any legs at all. And as for shape, he hasn't any. He is so broad and flat that he looks as if something big and heavy had passed over him and rolled him out flat. But how he can dig! If Johnny Chuck should ever see him digging, Johnny would die of envy. I'm going over there again to learn more about him."

"You'd better stay at home and mind your own affairs," replied little Mrs. Peter tartly. "No good comes of poking into the affairs of other people." This is true, and Peter knows it, but he just couldn't keep away from that part of the Green Meadows where he had discovered Digger the Badger. The more he saw of Digger, the greater became his curiosity about him. The less Peter can find out for himself about any one, the more curious he becomes, and all he could find out about Digger was that he slept most of the day, never went far from home, could dig faster than any one Peter had ever heard of, was short-tempered, and was treated with respect by all his neighbors, even Old Man Coyote, who seemed to know him very well.

All this made Peter more curious than ever, so one day, when Old Man Coyote happened along by the Old Briar-patch, Peter ventured to ask him about Digger the Badger. Old Man Coyote happened to be feeling in fine humor, for he had just eaten a good dinner. So he sat down just outside the dear Old Briar-patch, and this is what he told Peter:

"Digger is an old friend of mine, and I would advise you to treat him with the greatest respect, Peter, because if you don't, and he ever gets his claws on you, that will be the end of you. I wouldn't care to get in a fight with him myself, big as I am. You may have noticed that no one ever bothers him." Peter nodded, and Old Man Coyote continued: "I don't know of any one who minds his own business and keeps his nose out of the affairs of other people as Digger does. Greatest homebody I know of, unless it's Johnny Chuck, and even Johnny wanders off once in a while. But Digger never gets very far from his own doorstep. Says there is no place like home, and he can't see what anybody wants to leave the best place in the world for, even if they can come back to it."

Mrs. Peter reached over and poked Peter in the back, but he didn't even look at her. You know, she is always trying to keep Peter from roaming about so. Old Man Coyote went on with his story.

"It isn't because Digger is afraid. Goodness, no! I don't know of any one better able to take care of himself than Digger the Badger. I guess it is because his family always have been home-lovers. I've heard my grandfather tell how Digger's grandfather was just the same as Digger is, and how he had heard his grandfather say the same thing about Digger's grandfather's grandfather. They say that the

very first Badger, who founded the family way back in the days when the world was young, started this home-staying habit, and that all Badgers ever since then have been just like him. Digger is terribly proud of his family and of old Mr. Badger, who founded it so long ago. I don't know as I wonder at it. Old Mr. Badger certainly had more sense than some of his neighbors.

“You see, when Old Mother Nature first turned him loose in the Great World, he felt that she had not been at all fair in her treatment of him. His legs were so short and he was so broad and flat that everybody or nearly everybody laughed at him and good-naturedly poked fun at him. He pretended not to care, but he did care, just the same. No one really likes to be laughed at for something he cannot help. Mr. Badger would watch his neighbors, Mr. Wolf and Mr. Fox and Mr. Rabbit and others, run and jump, and then he would try to do as they did, and he couldn't because his legs were so short and so clumsy. He would sit for hours admiring the graceful forms of his neighbors and comparing them with his own homely shape. He would wonder what Old Mother Nature could have been thinking of when she made him.

“But he didn't say so to her. No, indeed! He kept his thoughts to himself and never let his neighbors know that he envied them in the least. One day he wandered out from the Green Forest on to the Green Meadows. He liked it out there. He liked to look up and see so much of the blue, blue sky all at once. He liked to look off and see a long distance. Of course, he couldn't do that in the Green Forest because of the trees. He liked being by himself because he felt so sensitive about his homely shape. He discovered that if he lay down flat on his stomach when any one came near, he was always passed unnoticed. Being so broad and flat and altogether shapeless, he could remain unseen right out there on the open Green Meadows even when the grass was short, and that was something that Mr. Wolf and Mr. Fox and even little Mr. Rabbit couldn't do. It pleased him. He began to be less envious of his neighbors.

“Then one never-to-be-forgotten day the Red Terror, which men call fire, broke loose in the Green Forest, and all the little people fled before it. Across the meadows and past old Mr. Badger they raced, with fear in their eyes, and behind them came the Red Terror. A terrible fear sprang up in the heart of Mr. Badger. With those short legs he never in the world could run fast enough to escape. What should he do? What *could* he do? He looked at the great claws on his stout feet, and all in a flash an idea came to him. Perhaps if he dug a hole and crawled into it, the Red Terror would not find him. At once he began to dig, and how the dirt did fly! In just no time at all he was quite out of sight, and by the time the Red Terror had reached there, he was so far down in the ground that he didn't even feel the heat.

“When it was all over and the earth had cooled off so that he could come out, he sat on the pile of dirt in front of his hole and did some hard thinking. He looked at his stout legs and long claws, and all at once it came over him that Old Mother Nature had not been so unfair after all. She had provided him with a means to take care of himself which he wouldn't exchange with any of his neighbors for all their speed and better looks. Later, when he saw how some of them were worn out with running, and some of them even had burned places on their coats, the last bit of envy disappeared.

“I guess,” said he to himself, ‘Old Mother Nature has given each one special blessings, but she expects us to find them out for ourselves. I've found mine out, some of them, anyway, and I'll just get busy and look for the rest. I'm going straight over to the prettiest part of the Green Meadows where the Red Terror hasn't been and dig myself a house in the ground. There is no place like a good home, so what is the good of roaming around? My legs were not intended for that, and those who have got longer legs can do it if they want to.’

“He did just what he said he would do. He practised digging until he was the best digger of all the little people. The more he dug, the stouter and stronger his legs became, and soon he found that all his neighbors respected his strength, and none would quarrel with him. Because he could get plenty to eat near his home, he never went far from his doorstep, and from that time on he lived in perfect safety and contentment. He brought his children up to do the same thing, and if you should go over and ask Digger to-day, he would tell you that there is no place like home, and that he envies no one. I'm glad, however, that not every one agrees with him, or I should have hard work to get a living,” concluded Old Man Coyote with a sly wink at Mrs. Peter.

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