

Mrs. Screech Owl

by Howard B. Famous

It was so much darker in the woods than in the park the little city squirrels could hardly believe it was time to get up when Mother Red Squirrel called them. But after they had washed the sleepiness out of their eyes they could see little pink patches of sky through the leaves and they knew the clock was not fast after all.

It took them much longer to dress than usual, because they had not stopped to brush their tails out the night before. Hazel's was dreadfully matted down and Bushie's was full of burs. How it did hurt when Hazel, as carefully as could be, helped him pick them out. But he bravely choked back the tears and blew his nose very hard. He did not want his new friends to think him a baby, of course.

Even their breakfast was different. They had country beetles; nice, white mushrooms, and crisp, fresh apple seeds. And after they had eaten and eaten, Mrs. Red Squirrel asked her little guests many questions—what their names were, where they lived, and how ever did they get so far from home?

How the two little squirrels' eyes popped out as Bushy-Tail told them of their home in the park, built for them out of boards and nails. He told how the caretaker came around every morning with a cup on a long pole and left a fresh supply of peanuts on their back porch, and he told of the wonderful dream he had had about a tree where all kinds of nuts grew side by side on the same branch. "I was so tired of peanuts," he added, "I set out to find the tree—but somehow—got—lost," and then his voice became so shaky he couldn't tell any more.

Mother Red Squirrel helped him to another fat beetle and said as soon as she had her work done she would see what she could do about it. "So many of the wood folks are moving south for the winter," she said. "I am sure I can find someone who will be going your way."

Now, Mrs. Screech Owl had seen Mrs. Red Squirrel hurry through the rain the night before with neither umbrella nor rubbers. So she said to herself, "This looks very queer. I will wait opposite the squirrel house, for I must know all."

And presently the entire woods was awakened by Mrs. Screech Owl's shrill voice calling, "Extra, extra! Mrs. Red Squirrel has city cousins visiting her." Of course this was not true. But "extras" seldom are accurate.

Anyway, Mrs. Red Squirrel thought she never would get her work done. You would not believe me if I should tell you how many times the door bell rang. First her neighbor on one side dropped in to borrow a pattern. Then a neighbor on the other side came over to return a book. Then friends from all over the woods just happened by, and always after a second or two they would say, "I hear you have company from the city."

And then Mother Red Squirrel would have to stop work and tell all about it. But the worst of it was nobody knew the way back to the park.

Pretty soon Mother Red Squirrel had an idea. "Mr. Bat is a great traveler," she said, "even if he does go to places only at night, I'll ask him." Now, nobody likes to be waked out of a sound sleep to be

asked questions. Mr. Bat blinked his eyes very hard, though by that time the sun was too bright for him to see a thing, and at first he said he didn't know the way either. Then Mrs. Red Squirrel flattered him a little and told how she had asked everybody the way to the park and nobody knew. "I felt sure you'd know," she added, at which Mr. Bat remembered he did and promised to take the little runaways home, just as soon as it should be dark enough!

When Bushy-Tail and Hazel learned that they were going home that night, they jumped up and down for joy. I forgot to tell you Mrs. Red Squirrel's two children were called Pinky and Rusty. They were such lively, frolicsome children that you just couldn't help but laugh to see them, and pretty soon Bushy-Tail and Hazel had forgotten all about how their parents must be worrying.

"How would it be if we all went on a picnic today?" asked Mother Red Squirrel. "I know where there are hazel nuts." I need not tell you what they answered. So she gave them each a little basket and took two herself and whisk—they were springing through the air, leaping from the ends of teetering branches or spinning along the tops of fences in a jiffy.

By and by they came to a lot of bushes and Mrs. Red Squirrel put down her basket "Let's not stop here," cried Bushy-Tail. "See, the burs don't open a bit, they are much too green to eat."

But Mrs. Red Squirrel said, "If we wait for the wind to rattle them out for us, chipmunks and children from over the hill will not leave us one. If we even wait until the burs open, crows and jays will carry them off."

Then she showed them how to cut off the little clusters of burs and soon they had their baskets full. What fun that picnic was. There were so many new things to see in that woods. Bushy-Tail kept crying, "Oh, look here, Hazel," and she was kept busy calling, "Come quick, Bushy-Tail."

Bushy-Tail had one eye open for the wonderful tree where all kinds of nuts grew side by side on the same branch. He could remember just how it looked in his dream, so he felt sure he would know it the minute he espied it. "If there isn't one in this wonderful woods," he was beginning to think, "I don't believe there is one anywhere."

All of a sudden Hazel and Bushy-Tail heard their little play-fellows give a scared little cry. They looked around quickly, but could see nothing to be frightened at—only a man carrying a heavy black stick against his shoulder. He kept stealing up nearer, and Hazel and Bushy-Tail kept very still watching him.

"I think he has some peanuts for us," said Hazel Squirrel.

"What do we want of peanuts now, come on," said Bushy-Tail, and they ran around the trunk of the tree. Just then a terrifying "whiz" went past their ears followed by a deafening "bang." They were so frightened they ran and ran, and did not stop until they were all out of breath.

It was the only time they ever had even seen a man with a gun. After that they never took nuts from men carrying sticks.

That afternoon Mrs. Red Squirrel made Hazel and Bushy-Tail take a little nap. "You know you will be up late to-night," she said. Mr. Bat had not forgotten his promise and just as soon as it began to get dark he was knocking at the door. He said there would be a moon, so they need not bother a fire-fly

to go too.

Mrs. Red Squirrel and her two children went as far as the edge of the woods with them. “Now you know the way you must come often,” they called after Bushy-Tail and Hazel. “Don’t forget to come and see us, too, and thank you for the nice time,” they called back. You see, they had been well trained and did not forget their manners.

“I think I should like to live in the park,” said Rusty to his mother. “Bushy says there are no traps there or bad men with guns.” Mrs. Red Squirrel was thinking she would like to have her groceries delivered, too, so she answered, “I think I shall speak to your father about it to-night.”

When Bushy-Tail and little Hazel Squirrel finally reached the edge of the park it was very late and they were very tired indeed. But when they got within sight of their homes and saw the lights in the windows they began to run again anyway.

Do you think their mothers were glad to see them once more? Well, was your mother glad to see you that day she thought you were lost, when you really were not? And if you still want to know if Bushy-Tail ever found the wonderful tree where all kinds of nuts grew side by side on the same branch, all I can tell you is that they never found it in the park and that they never ran away again.

Source:

Famous, Howard. “Mrs. Screech Owl.” *Hazel Squirrel and Other Stories*. Racine: Whitman Publishing Co., 1917. 26 – 40. Electronic.