

Flitter the Bat and His Family

by Thornton W. Burgess

In the dusk of early evening, as Peter Rabbit sat trying to make up his mind whether to spend that night at home in the dear Old Briar-patch with timid little Mrs. Peter or go over to the Green Forest in search of adventure, a very fine, squeaky voice which came right out of the air above him startled him for a moment.

“Better stay at home, Peter Rabbit. Better stay at home to-night,” said the thin, squeaky voice.

“Hello, Flitter!” exclaimed Peter, as he stared up at a little dark form darting this way, twisting that way, now up, now down, almost brushing Peter's head and then flying so high he could hardly be seen. “Why should I stay at home?”

“Because I saw Old Man Coyote sneaking along the edge of the Green Forest, Reddy Fox is hunting on the Green Meadows, and Hooty the Owl is on watch in the Old Orchard,” replied Flitter the Red Bat. “Of course it is no business of mine what you do, Peter Rabbit, but were I in your place I certainly would stay at home. Gracious! I'm glad I can go where I please when I please. You ought to fly, Peter. You ought to fly. There is nothing like it.”

“I wish I could,” sighed Peter.

“Well, don't say I didn't warn you,” squeaked Flitter, and darted away in the direction of Farmer Brown's house. Peter wisely decided that the dear Old Briar-patch was the best place for him that night, so he remained at home, to the joy of timid little Mrs. Peter, and spent the night eating, dozing and wondering how it would seem to be able to fly like Flitter the Bat.

Flitter was still in his mind when he started for school the next morning, and by the time he got there he was bubbling over with curiosity and questions. He could hardly wait for school to be called to order. Old Mother Nature noticed how fidgety he was.

“What have you on your mind, Peter?” she asked.

“Didn't you tell us that the Shrew family and the Mole family are the only families in this country in the order of insect-eaters?” asked Peter.

“I certainly did,” was the prompt reply. “Doesn't Flitter the Bat live on insects?” asked Peter.

Old Mother Nature nodded. “He does,” said she. “In fact he lives altogether on insects.”

“Then why isn't he a member of that order?” demanded Peter.

Old Mother Nature smiled, for she was pleased that Peter had thought of this. “That question does you credit, Peter,” said she. “The reason is that he and his relatives are so very different from other animals that they have been placed in an order of their own. It is called the Chi-rop-ter-a, which means wing-handed. How many of you know Flitter the Bat?”

"I've often seen him," declared Jumper the Hare.

"So have I," said Chatterer the Red Squirrel. Each of the others said the same thing. There wasn't one who hadn't watched and envied Flitter darting about in the air just at dusk of early evening or as the Black Shadows were stealing away in the early morning. Old Mother Nature smiled.

"Seeing him isn't knowing him," said she. "Who is there who knows anything about him and his ways save that he flies at night and catches insects in the air?"

She waited a minute or two, but no one spoke. The fact is there was not one who really knew anything about Flitter. "It is one of the strange things of life," said she, "that people often know nothing about the neighbors whom they see every day. But in this case it is not to be wondered at. I suspect none of you has seen Flitter, excepting in the air, and then he moves so rapidly that there is no chance to get a good look at him. I think this is just the time and place for you to really make the acquaintance of Flitter the Red Bat."

She stepped over to a bush and parted the leaves. Hanging from a twig was what appeared at first glance to be a rumpled, reddish-brown dead leaf. She touched it lightly. At once it came to life, stirring uneasily. A thin, squeaky voice peevishly demanded to know what was wanted.

"You have some callers, a few of your friends who want to get really acquainted with you. Suppose you wake up for a few minutes," explained Old Mother Nature pleasantly.

Flitter, for that is just who it was, yawned once or twice sleepily, shook himself, then grinned down at the wondering faces of his friends crowded about just under him. "Hello, folks," said he in that thin, squeaky voice of his.

The sunlight fell full on him, but he seemed not to mind it in the least. In fact, he appeared to enjoy its warmth. He was hanging by his toes, head down, his wings folded. He was about four inches long, and his body was much like that of a Mouse. His fur was fine and thick, a beautiful orange-red. For his size his ears were large. Instead of the long head and sharp nose of the Mouse family, Flitter had a rather round head and blunt nose. Almost at once Peter Rabbit made a discovery. It was that Flitter possessed a pair of bright, little, snapping eyes and didn't seem in the least bothered by the bright light.

"Where did that saying 'blind as a Bat' ever come from?" demanded Peter.

Old Mother Nature laughed. "Goodness knows; I don't," said she. "There is nothing blind about Flitter. He sleeps through the day and does his hunting in the dusk of evening or early morning, but if he is disturbed and has to fly during the day, he has no trouble in seeing. Flitter, stretch out one of your wings so that everybody can see it."

Obediently Flitter stretched out one of his wings. Everybody gasped, for it was the first time any of them ever had seen one of those wings near enough to know just what it was like. Flitter's arm was long, especially from his elbow to his hand. But the surprising thing was the length of his three fingers. Each finger appeared to be about as long as the whole arm. From his shoulder a thin, rubbery skin was stretched to the ends of the long fingers, then across to the ankle of his hind foot on that side, and from there across to the tip of his tail. A little short thumb with a long, curved claw stuck up free from the edge of the wing.

"Now you can see just why he is called winghanded," explained Old Mother Nature, as Flitter folded the wing. In a minute he began to clean it. Everybody laughed, for it was funny to watch him. He would take the skin of the wing in his mouth and pull and stretch it as if it were rubber. He washed it with his tiny tongue. Then he washed his fur. You see, Flitter is very neat. With the little claw of his thumb he scratched his head and combed his hair. All the time he remained hanging head down, clinging to the twig with his toes.

"Where is Mrs. Flitter?" asked Old Mother Nature.

"Don't know," replied Flitter, beginning on the other wing. "She's quite equal to looking after herself, so I don't worry about her."

"Nor about your babies. Flitter, I'm ashamed of you. You are a poor kind of father," declared Old Mother Nature severely. "If you don't know where to find your family, I'll show you."

She stepped over to the very next tree, parted the leaves, and there, sure enough, hung Mrs. Flitter fast asleep. And clinging to her were three of the funniest babies in all the Great World! All were asleep, and Old Mother Nature didn't awaken them. As for Flitter, he seemed to take not the slightest interest in his family, but went right on with his toilet.

"Flitter the Red Bat is one of the best known of the whole family in this country," said Old Mother Nature, as they left Flitter to resume his nap. He is found from the East to the Far West, from ocean to ocean. Like the birds, he migrates when cold weather comes, returning in the early summer. Although, like all Bats, he sleeps all day as a rule, he doesn't mind the sunlight, as you have just seen for yourselves. Sometimes on dull, dark days he doesn't wait for evening, but flies in the afternoon. Usually he is the first of the Bat family to appear in the evening, often coming out while it is still light enough to show the color of his red coat. No other member of his family has a coat of this color.

"Some people call him the Tree Bat. After seeing him hanging over there I think you can guess why. He rarely goes to a cave for his daytime sleep, as most of his relatives do, but hangs by his toes from a twig of a tree or bush, frequently not far from the ground, just as he is right now.

"As all of you who have watched him know, Flitter is a swift flier. This is because his wings are long and narrow. They are made for speed. I want you to know that the Bats are among the most wonderful of all my little people. Few if any birds can equal them in the air because of their wonderful ability to twist and turn. They are masters of the art of flying. Moreover, they make no sound with their wings, something which only the Owls among birds can boast of.

"You all saw the three babies clinging to Mrs. Flitter. Most Bats have but two babies at a time, occasionally only one, but the Red Bat and his larger cousin, the Hoary Bat, have three or four. Mrs. Flitter carries her babies about with her until they are quite big. When they are too large to be carried she leaves them hanging in a tree while she hunts for her meals.

"Flitter has many cousins. One of these is the Little Brown Bat, one of the smallest members of the family and found all over the country. He is brown all over. He is sometimes called the Cave Bat, because whenever a cave is to be found he sleeps there. Sometimes great numbers of these little Bats are found crowded together in a big cave. When there is no cave handy, a barn or hollow tree is used. Often he will creep behind the closed blinds of a house to spend the day.

“Very like this little fellow in color is his cousin the Big Brown Bat, called the House Bat and the Carolina Bat. He is especially fond of the homes of men. He is a little bigger than the Red Bat. While the latter is one of the first Bats to appear in the evening, the former is one of the last, coming out only when it is quite dark. He also found all over the country.

“The Silvery Bat is of nearly the same size and in many places is more common than any its cousins. The fur is dark brown or black with white tips, especially in the young. From this it gets its name. One of the largest and handsomest of the Bat cousins, and one of the rarest is the Hoary Bat. His fur is a mixture of dark and light brown tipped with white. He is very handsome. His wings are very long and narrow and he is one of the most wonderful of all fliers. He is a lover of the Green Forest and does his hunting high above the tree-tops, making his appearance late in the evening. Like the Red Bat he spends the hours of daylight hanging in a tree.

“Down in the Southeast is a member of the family with ears so big that he is called the Big-eared Bat. He is a little chap, smaller than Little Brown Bat, and his ears are half as long his head and body together. What do you think of that? For his size he has the biggest ears of any animal in all this great country. A relative in the Southwest is the Big-eared Bat.

“All members of the Bat family are drinkers and usually the first thing they do when they start out at dusk is to seek water. All live wholly on insects, and for this reason they are among the very best friends of man. They eat great numbers of Mosquitoes. They do no harm whatever, which is more than can be said for some of the rest of you little folks. Now who shall we learn about next?”

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