

Johnny Chuck Joins the Class

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit delivered Mother Nature's message to Johnny Chuck. Johnny didn't seem at all pleased. He grumbled and growled to himself. He didn't want to go to school. He didn't want to learn anything about his relatives. He was perfectly satisfied with things as they were. The truth is, Johnny Chuck was already beginning to get fat with good living and he is naturally lazy. As a rule he can find plenty to eat very near his home, so he seldom goes far from his own doorstep. Peter left him grumbling and growling, and chuckled to himself all the way back to the dear Old Briar-patch. He knew that Johnny Chuck would not dare disobey Old Mother Nature.

Sure enough, the next morning Johnny Chuck came waddling through the Green Forest just as Old Mother Nature was about to open school. He didn't look at all happy, and he didn't reply at all to the greetings of the others. But when Old Mother Nature spoke to him he was very polite.

"Good morning, Johnny Chuck," said she.

Johnny bobbed his head and said, "Good morning."

"I understand," continued Old Mother Nature, "That you are not at all interested in learning about your relatives. I am sorry for any one who doesn't want to learn. The more one knows the better fitted he is to take care of himself and do his part in the work of the Great World. However, it wasn't for your benefit that I sent word for you to be here this morning. It was for the benefit of your friends and neighbors. Now sit up so that all can get a good look at you."

Johnny Chuck obediently sat up, and of course all the others stared at him. It made him feel quite uncomfortable. "You remember," said Old Mother Nature, "how surprised you little folks were when I told you that Johnny Chuck is a member of the Squirrel family. Happy Jack, you go sit beside Johnny Chuck, and the rest of you look hard at Happy Jack and Johnny and see if you do not see a family resemblance."

Seeing Happy Jack and Johnny Chuck sitting up side by side, Peter Rabbit caught the resemblance at once. There was sort of family look about them. "Why! Why-ee! Johnny Chuck does look like a Squirrel," he exclaimed.

"Of course he looks like a Squirrel, because he is one," said Old Mother Nature. "Johnny Chuck is very much bigger and so stout in the body that he has none of the gracefulness of the true Squirrels. But you will notice that the shape of his head is much the same as that of Happy Jack. He has a Squirrel face when you come to look at him closely. The Woodchucks, sometimes called Ground Hogs, though why any one should call them this is more than I can understand, belong to the Marmot branch of the Squirrel family, and wherever found they look much alike.

"As you will notice, Johnny Chuck's coat is brownish-yellow, his feet are very dark brown, almost black. His head is dark brown with light gray on his cheeks. Beneath he is reddish-orange, including his throat. His tail is short for a member of the Squirrel family, and although it is bushy, it is not very big. He has a number of whiskers and they are black. Some Woodchucks are quite gray, and occasionally there is one who is almost, or wholly black, just as there are black Gray Squirrels.

“Johnny, here, is not fond of the Green Forest, but loves the Old orchard and the Green Meadows. In some parts of the country there are members of his family who prefer to live just on the edge of the Green Forest. You will notice that Johnny has stout claws. Those are to help him dig, for all the Marmot family are great diggers. What other use do you have for those claws, Johnny?”

“They help me to climb,” replied Johnny promptly.

“Climb!” exclaimed Peter Rabbit. “Who ever heard of a Woodchuck climbing?”

“I can climb if I have to,” retorted Johnny Chuck indignantly. “I’ve climbed up bushes and low trees lots of times, and if I can get a good run first, I can climb up the straight trunk of a tree with rough bark to the first branches—if they are not too far above ground. You ask Reddy Fox if I can’t; he knows.”

“That’s quite true, Johnny,” said Old Mother Nature. “You can climb a little, but as a real climber you are not much of a success. You are better as a digger.”

“He certainly is all right as a digger,” exclaimed Peter Rabbit. “My, how he can make the sand fly! Johnny Chuck certainly is right at home when it comes to digging.”

“You ought to be thankful that he is,” said Old Mother Nature, “for the holes he has dug have saved your life more than once. By the way, Peter, since you are so well acquainted with those holes, suppose you tell us what kind of a home Johnny Chuck has.”

Peter was delighted to air his knowledge. “The last one I was in,” said he, “was a long tunnel slanting down for quite a distance and then straightening out. The entrance was quite large with a big heap of sand out in front of it. Down a little way the tunnel grew smaller and then remained the same size all the rest of the way. Way down at the farther end was a nice little bedroom with some grass in it. There were one or two other little rooms, and there were two branch tunnels leading up to the surface of the ground, making side or back doorways. There was no sand around either of these, and they were quite hidden by the long grass hanging over them. I don’t understand how Johnny made those doorways without leaving any sand on the doorsteps.”

“Huh!” interrupted Johnny Chuck. “That was easy enough. I pushed all the sand out of the main doorway so that there would be nothing to attract the attention of any one passing near those back doorways. Those back doorways are very handy in time of danger.”

“Do you always have three doorways?” asked Happy Jack.

“No,” replied Johnny Chuck. “Sometimes I have only two and once in a while only one. But that isn’t really safe, and I mean always to have at least two.”

“Do you use the same house year after year?” piped up Striped Chipmunk.

Johnny shook his head. “No,” said he. “I dig a new hole each spring. Mrs. Chuck and I like a change of scene. Usually my new home isn’t very far from my old one, because I am not fond of traveling. Sometimes, however, if we cannot find a place that just suits us, we go quite a distance.”

"Are your babies born down in that little bedroom in the ground?" asked Jumper the Hare.

"Of course," replied Johnny Chuck. "Where else would they be born?"

"I didn't know but Mrs. Chuck might make a nest on the ground the way Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Jumper do," replied Jumper meekly.

"No, siree!" replied Johnny. "Our babies are born in that little underground bedroom, and they stay down in the ground until they are big enough to hunt for food for themselves."

"How many do you usually have?" inquired Chatterer the Red Squirrel.

"Six or eight," replied Johnny Chuck. "Mrs. Chuck and I believe in large families."

"Do you eat nuts like the rest of our family?" inquired Striped Chipmunk.

"No," replied Johnny Chuck. "Give me green food every time. There is nothing so good as tender sweet clover and young grass, unless it be some of those fine vegetables Farmer Brown grows in his garden."

Peter Rabbit nodded his head very emphatically as if he quite agreed.

"I suppose you are what is called a vegetarian, then," said Happy Jack, to which Johnny Chuck replied that he supposed he was. "And I suppose that is why you sleep all winter," added Happy Jack.

"If I didn't I would starve," responded Johnny Chuck promptly. "When it gets near time for Jack Frost to arrive, I stuff and stuff and stuff on the last of the good green things until I'm so fat I can hardly waddle. Then I go down to my bedroom, curl up and go to sleep. Cold weather, snow and ice don't worry me a bit."

"I know," spoke up Striped Chipmunk. "I sleep most of the winter myself. Of course I have a lot of food stored away down in my house, and once in a while I wake up and eat a little. Do you ever wake up in the winter, Johnny Chuck?"

"No," replied Johnny. "I sleep right through, thank goodness. Sometimes I wake up very early in the spring before the snow is all gone, earlier than I wish I did. That is where my fat comes in handy. It keeps me warm and keeps me alive until I can find the first green plants. Perhaps you have noticed that early in the spring I am as thin as I was fat in the fall. This is because I have used up the fat, waiting for the first green things to appear."

"Do you have many enemies?" asked Peter Rabbit, who has so many himself that he is constantly thinking of them.

"Not many, but enough," growled Johnny Chuck. "Reddy Fox, Old Man Coyote, men and Dogs are the worst. Of course, when I was small I always had to be watching out for Hawks, and of course, like all the rest of us little folks, I am afraid of Shadow the Weasel. Reddy Fox has tried to dig me out more than once, but I can dig faster than he can. If he ever gets me cornered, he'll find that I can fight. A small Dog surprised me once before I could get to my hole and I guess that Dog never will tackle another Woodchuck."

“Time is up,” interrupted Old Mother Nature. “Johnny Chuck has a big cousin out in the mountains of the Great West named Whistler, and on the prairies of the Great West he has a smaller cousin named Yap Yap. They are quite important members of the Marmot family, and to-morrow I'll tell you about them if you want me to. You need not come tomorrow, Johnny Chuck, unless you want to,” she added.

Johnny Chuck hung his head, for he was a little ashamed that he had been so unwilling to come that morning.

“If you please, Mother Nature,” said he, “I think I'll come. I didn't know I had any close relatives, and I want to know about them.”

So it was agreed that all would be on hand at sun-up the next morning, and then everybody started for home to think over the things they had learned.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. “Johnny Chuck Joins the Class.” *The Burgess Animal Book for Children*.
Electronic.