

Why Jimmy Skunk Wears Stripes

by Thornton W. Burgess

Jimmy Skunk, as everybody knows, wears a striped suit, a suit of black and white. There was a time, long, long ago, when all the Skunk family wore black. Very handsome their coats were, too, a beautiful, glossy black. They were very, very proud of them and took the greatest care of them, brushing them carefully ever so many times a day.

There was a Jimmy Skunk then, just as there is now, and he was head of all the Skunk family. Now this Jimmy Skunk was very proud and thought himself very much of a gentleman. He was very independent and cared for no one. Like a great many other independent people, he did not always consider the rights of others. Indeed, it was hinted in the wood and on the Green Meadows that not all of Jimmy Skunk's doings would bear the light of day. It was openly said that he was altogether too fond of prowling about at night, but no one could prove that he was responsible for mischief done in the night, for no one saw him. You see his coat was so black that in the darkness of the night it was not visible at all.

Now about this time of which I am telling you Mrs. Ruffed Grouse made a nest at the foot of the Great Pine and in it she laid fifteen beautiful buff eggs. Mrs. Grouse was very happy, very happy indeed, and all the little meadow folks who knew of her happiness were happy too, for they all loved shy, demure, little Mrs. Grouse. Every morning when Peter Rabbit trotted down the Lone Little Path through the wood past the Great Pine he would stop for a few minutes to chat with Mrs. Grouse. Happy Jack Squirrel would bring her the news every afternoon. The Merry Little Breezes of Old Mother West Wind would run up a dozen times a day to see how she was getting along.

One morning Peter Rabbit, coming down the Lone Little Path for his usual morning call, found a terrible state of affairs. Poor little Mrs. Grouse was heart-broken. All about the foot of the Great Pine lay the empty shells of her beautiful eggs. They had been broken and scattered this way and that.

"How did it happen?" asked Peter Rabbit.

"I don't know," sobbed poor little Mrs. Grouse. "In the night when I was fast asleep something pounced upon me. I managed to get away and fly up in the top of the Great Pine. In the morning I found all my eggs broken, just as you see them here."

Peter Rabbit looked the ground over very carefully. He hunted around behind the Great Pine, he looked under the bushes, he studied the ground with a very wise air. Then he hopped off down the Lone Little Path to the Green Meadows. He stopped at the house of Johnny Chuck.

"What makes your eyes so big and round?" asked Johnny Chuck.

Peter Rabbit came very close so as to whisper in Johnny Chuck's ear, and told him all that he had seen. Together they went to Jimmy Skunk's house. Jimmy Skunk was in bed. He was very sleepy and very cross when he came to the door. Peter Rabbit told him what he had seen.

"Too bad! Too bad!" said Jimmy Skunk, and yawned sleepily.

“Won't you join us in trying to find out who did it?” asked Johnny Chuck.

Jimmy Skunk said he would be delighted to come but that he had some other business that morning and that he would join them in the afternoon. Peter Rabbit and Johnny Chuck went on. Pretty soon they met the Merry Little Breezes and told them the dreadful story.

“What shall we do?” asked Johnny Chuck.

“We'll hurry over and tell Old Dame Nature,” cried the Merry Little Breezes, “and ask her what to do.”

So away flew the Merry Little Breezes to Old Dame Nature and told her all the dreadful story. Old Dame Nature listened very attentively. Then she sent the Merry Little Breezes to all the little meadow folks to tell every one to be at the Great Pine that afternoon. Now whatever Old Dame Nature commanded all the meadow folks were obliged to do. They did not dare to disobey her. Promptly at four o'clock that afternoon all the meadow folks were gathered around the foot of the Great Pine. Broken-hearted little Mrs. Ruffed Grouse sat beside her empty nest, with all the broken shells about her.

Reddy Fox, Peter Rabbit, Johnny Chuck, Billy Mink, Little Joe Otter, Jerry Muskrat, Hooty the Owl, Bobby Coon, Sammy Jay, Blacky the Crow, Grandfather Frog, Mr. Toad, Spotty the Turtle, the Merry Little Breezes, all were there. Last of all came Jimmy Skunk. Very handsome he looked in his shining black coat and very sorry he appeared that such a dreadful thing should have happened. He told Mrs. Grouse how badly he felt, and he loudly demanded that the culprit should be found out and severely punished.

Old Dame Nature has the most smiling face in the world, but this time it was very, very grave indeed. First she asked little Mrs. Grouse to tell her story all over again that all might hear. Then each in turn was asked to tell where he had been the night before. Johnny Chuck, Happy Jack Squirrel, Striped Chipmunk, Sammy Jay and Blacky the Crow had gone to bed when Mr. Sun went down behind the Purple Hills. Jerry Muskrat, Billy Mink, Little Joe Otter, Grandfather Frog and Spotty the Turtle had not left the Smiling Pool. Bobby Coon had been down in Farmer Brown's cornfield. Hooty the Owl had been hunting in the lower end of the Green Meadows. Peter Rabbit had been down in the berry patch. Mr. Toad had been under the piece of bark which he called a house. Old Dame Nature called on Jimmy Skunk last of all. Jimmy protested that he had been very, very tired and had gone to bed very early indeed and had slept the whole night through.

Then Old Dame Nature asked Peter Rabbit what he had found among the egg shells that morning.

Peter Rabbit hopped out and laid three long black hairs before Old Dame Nature. “These,” said Peter Rabbit “are what I found among the egg shells.”

Then Old Dame Nature called Johnny Chuck. “Tell us, Johnny Chuck,” said she, “what you saw when you called at Jimmy Skunk's house this morning.”

“I saw Jimmy Skunk,” said Johnny Chuck, “and Jimmy seemed very, very sleepy. It seemed to me that his whiskers were yellow.”

“That will do,” said Old Dame Nature, and then she called Old Mother West Wind.

“What time did you come down on the Green Meadows this morning?”

“Just at the break of day,” said Old Mother West Wind, “as Mr. Sun was coming up from behind the Purple Hills.”

“And whom did you see so early in the morning?” asked Old Dame Nature.

“I saw Bobby Coon going home from old Farmer Brown's cornfield,” said Old Mother West Wind. “I saw Hooty the Owl coming back from the lower end of the Green Meadows. I saw Peter Rabbit down in the berry patch. Last of all I saw something like a black shadow coming down the Lone Little Path toward the house of Jimmy Skunk.”

Every one was looking very hard at Jimmy Skunk. Jimmy began to look very unhappy and very uneasy.

“Who wears a black coat?” asked Dame Nature.

“Jimmy Skunk!” shouted all the little meadow folks.

“What MIGHT make whiskers yellow?” asked Old Dame Nature.

No one seemed to know at first. Then Peter Rabbit spoke up. “It MIGHT be the yolk of an egg,” said Peter Rabbit.

“Who are likely to be sleepy on a bright sunny morning?” asked Old Dame Nature.

“People who have been out all night,” said Johnny Chuck, who himself always goes to bed with the sun.

“Jimmy Skunk,” said Old Dame Nature, and her voice was very stern, very stern indeed, and her face was very grave. “Jimmy Skunk, I accuse you of having broken and eaten the eggs of Mrs. Grouse. What have you to say for yourself?”

Jimmy Skunk hung his head. He hadn't a word to say. He just wanted to sneak away by himself.

“Jimmy Skunk,” said Old Dame Nature, “because your handsome black coat of which you are so proud has made it possible for you to move about in the night without being seen, and because we can no longer trust you upon your honor, henceforth you and your descendants shall wear a striped coat, which is the sign that you cannot be trusted. Your coat hereafter shall be black and white, that when you move about in the night you will always be visible.”

And this is why that to this day Jimmy Skunk wears a striped suit of black and white.

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