

## How Old Mr. Mink Taught Himself to Swim

by Thornton W. Burgess

Of all the little people who live in the Green Forest or on the Green Meadows or around the Smiling Pool, Billy Mink has the most accomplishments. At least, it seems that way to his friends and neighbors. He can run very swiftly; he can climb very nimbly; his eyes and his ears and his nose are all wonderfully keen, and—he can swim like a fish. Yes, Sir, Billy Mink is just as much at home in the water as out of it. So, wherever he happens to be, in the Green Forest, out on the Green Meadows, along the Laughing Brook, or in the Smiling Pool, he feels perfectly at home and quite able to look out for himself.

Once Billy Mink had boasted that he could do anything that any one else who wore fur could do, but boasters almost always come to grief, and Grandfather Frog had brought Billy to grief that time. He had invited every one to meet at the Smiling Pool and see Billy Mink do whatever any one else who wore fur could do, and then, when Billy had run and jumped and climbed and swum, Grandfather Frog had called Flitter the Bat. There was some one wearing fur who could fly, and of course Billy Mink couldn't do that. It cured Billy of boasting,—for a while, anyway.

Now Peter Rabbit, who can do little but run and jump, used sometimes to feel a wee bit of envy in his heart when he thought of all the things that Billy Mink could do and do well. Somehow Peter could never make it seem quite right that one person should be able to do so many things when others could do only one or two things. He said as much to Grandfather Frog one day, as they watched Billy Mink catch a fat trout.

"Chug-a-rum!" said Grandfather Frog and looked sharply at Peter. "Chug-a-rum! People never know what they can do till they try. Once upon a time Billy Mink's great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather couldn't swim any more than you can, but he didn't waste any time foolishly wishing that he could."

"What did he do?" asked Peter eagerly.

"Learned how," replied Grandfather Frog gruffly. "Made it his business to learn how. Then he taught his children, and they taught their children, and after a long time it came natural to the Mink family to swim."

"Did it take old Mr. Mink very long to learn how?" asked Peter wistfully.

"Quite a while," replied Grandfather Frog. "Quite a while. Perhaps you would like to hear about it."

"Oh, if you please, Grandfather Frog," cried Peter. "If you please. I should love dearly to hear about it. Perhaps then I can learn to swim."

Grandfather Frog snapped up a foolish green fly that happened his way, and Peter heard something that sounded very much like a chuckle. He looked at Grandfather Frog suspiciously. Was that chuckle because of the foolish green fly, or was Grandfather Frog laughing at him? Peter wasn't sure.

"It all happened a long time ago when the world was young, as a great many other things happened," began Grandfather Frog. "Old Mr. Mink, the ever-so-great-grandfather of Billy Mink, couldn't do all the things that Billy can now. For instance, he couldn't swim. But he could do a great many things, and he was very smart. It has always run in the Mink family to be smart. He dressed very much as Billy does now, except that he didn't have the waterproof coat that Billy has. And he was a great traveler, just as Billy is. Everybody smaller than he and some who were bigger were a little bit afraid of old Mr. Mink, for he was quite as sly and cunning as Mr. Fox, and it was suspected that he knew a great deal more than he ever admitted about eggs that were stolen and nests that were broken up, and other strange things that happened in the Green Forest and along the Laughing Brook. But he never was caught doing anything wrong and always seemed to be minding his own business, so, all things considered, he got along very well with his neighbors.

"Now Mr. Mink was small and spry, and his wits were as nimble as his feet. He saw all that was going on about him, and he was wise enough to keep his tongue still, so that it never got him into trouble as gossipy tongues do some people I know."

Peter Rabbit fidgeted uneasily. It seemed to him that Grandfather Frog had looked at him very hard when he said this. But Grandfather Frog just cleared his throat and went on with his story.

"Yes, Sir, old Mr. Mink kept his eyes wide open and his ears wide open and the wits in his little brown head always working. He noticed that those who were fussy about what they ate and insisted on having a special kind of food often went hungry or had to hunt long and hard to find what they liked, so he made up his mind to learn to eat many kinds of food. This is how it happens that he learned to like fish. His big cousin, Mr. Otter, often caught a bigger fish than he could eat all himself and would leave some of it on the bank. Mr. Mink would find it and help himself.

"But having to depend on Mr. Otter to get the fish for him didn't suit Mr. Mink at all. In the first place, he didn't have as much as he wanted. And then again he didn't have it when he wanted it. 'If I could learn to catch fish for myself, I would be much better off,' thought Mr. Mink. After this he spent a great deal of time on the banks of the Smiling Pool watching Mr. Otter swim to see just how he did it. 'If he can swim, I can swim,' said Mr. Mink to himself, and went off up the Laughing Brook to a quiet little pool where the water was not deep.

"At first he didn't like it at all. The water got in his ears and up his nose and choked him. And then it was so dreadfully wet! But he would grit his teeth and keep at it. After a while he got so that he could paddle around a little. Gradually he lost his fear of the water. Then he found that because he naturally moved so quickly he could sometimes catch foolish minnows who swam in where the water was very shallow. This was great sport, and he quite often had fish for dinner now.

"But he wasn't satisfied. No, Sir, he wasn't satisfied. Whatever Mr. Mink did, he wanted to do well. He could run well and climb well, and there was no better hunter in all the Green Forest. He was bound that he would swim well. So he kept trying and trying. He learned to fill his lungs with air and hold his breath for a long time, while he swam as fast as ever he could with his head under water as he had seen his cousin, Mr. Otter, swim. The more he did this, the longer he could hold his breath. After a while he found that because he was slim and trim and moved so fast, he could out-swim Mr. Muskrat, and this made him feel very good indeed, for Mr. Muskrat spent nearly all his time in the water and was accounted a very good swimmer. There was only one thing that bothered Mr. Mink. The water was so dreadfully wet! Every time he came out of it, he had to run his hardest to dry off and keep from getting

cold. This was very tiresome and he did wish that there was an easier way of drying off.

"Then came the bad time, the sad time, when food was scarce, and most of the little people in the Green Forest and on the Green Meadow went hungry. But Mr. Mink didn't go hungry. Oh, my, no! You see, he had learned to catch fish, and so he had plenty to eat. When Old Mother Nature came to see how all the little people were getting along, she was very much surprised to find that Mr. Mink had become a famous swimmer. She watched him catch a fish. Then she watched him run about to dry off and keep from getting cold, and her eyes twinkled.

"'He who helps himself deserves to be helped,' said Old Mother Nature. Mr. Mink didn't know what she meant by that, but the next morning he found out. Yes, Sir, the next morning he found out. He found that he had a brand new coat over his old one, and the new one was waterproof. He could swim as much as he pleased and not get the least bit wet, because the water couldn't get through that new coat. And ever since that long-ago day when the world was young, the Minks have had waterproof coats and have been famous fishermen. Hello, Peter Rabbit! What under the sun are you trying to do, swelling yourself up that way?"

"I—I was just practising holding my breath," replied Peter and looked very, very foolish.

"Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Grandfather Frog. "You can't learn to swim by holding your breath on dry land, Peter Rabbit."

Source:

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