

An Independent Family

by Thornton W. Burgess

Just as Old Mother Nature asked who they should learn about next, Happy Jack Squirrel spied some one coming down the Lone Little Path. "See who's coming!" cried Happy Jack.

Everybody turned to look down the Lone Little Path. There, ambling along in the most matter-of-fact and unconcerned way imaginable, came a certain small person who was dressed wholly in black and white.

"Hello, Jimmy Skunk," cried Chatterer the Red Squirrel. "What are you doing over here in the Green Forest?" Jimmy Skunk looked up and grinned. It was a slow, good-natured grin. "Hello, everybody," said he. "I thought I would just amble over here and see your school. I suppose all you fellows are getting so wise that pretty soon you will think you know all there is to know. Have any of you seen any fat Beetles around here?"

Just then Jimmy noticed Old Mother Nature and hastened to bow his head in a funny way. "Please excuse me, Mother Nature," he said, "I thought school was over. I don't want to interrupt."

Old Mother Nature smiled. The fact is, Old Mother Nature is rather fond of Jimmy Skunk. "You aren't interrupting," said she. "The fact is, we had just ended the lesson about Flitter the Bat and his relatives, and were trying to decide who to study about next. I think you came along at just the right time. You belong to a large and rather important order, one that all these little folks here ought to know about. How many cousins have you, Jimmy?"

Jimmy Skunk looked a little surprised at the question. He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Let me see," said he, "I have several close cousins in the Skunk branch of the family, but I presume you want to know who my cousins are outside of the Skunk branch. They are Shadow the Weasel, Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter. These are the only ones I can think of now."

"How about Digger the Badger?" asked Old Mother Nature.

A look of surprise swept over Jimmy Skunk's face. "Digger the Badger!" he exclaimed. "Digger the Badger is no cousin of mine!"

"Tut, tut, tut!" chided Old Mother Nature. "Tut, tut, tut, Jimmy Skunk! It is high time you came to school. Digger the Badger is just as much a cousin of yours as is Shadow the Weasel. You are members of the same order and it is a rather large order. It is called the Car-niv-o-ra, which means 'flesh-eating.' You are a member of the Marten or Weasel family, and that family is called the 'Mus-tel-i-dae.' Digger the Badger is also a member of that family. That means that you two are cousins. You and Digger and Glutton the Wolverine belong to the stout-bodied branch of the family. Billy Mink, Little Joe Otter, Shadow the Weasel, Pekan the Fisher and Spite the Marten belong to its slim-bodied branch. But all are members of the same family despite the difference in looks, and thus, of course, are cousins. Seeing that you are here, Jimmy, I think we will find out just how much these little folks know about you.

"Peter Rabbit, tell us what you know about Jimmy Skunk."

“I know one thing about him,” declared Peter, “and that's that he is the most independent fellow in the world. He isn't afraid of anybody. I saw Buster Bear actually step out of his way the other day.”

Jimmy Skunk grinned. “Buster always treats me very politely,” said Jimmy.

“I have noticed that everybody does, even Farmer Brown's boy,” spoke up Happy Jack Squirrel.

“It is easy enough to be independent when everybody is afraid of you,” sputtered Chatterer the Red Squirrel.

“Just why is everybody afraid of Jimmy Skunk,” asked Old Mother Nature.

“They are afraid of that little scent gun he carries,” spoke up Peter Rabbit. “I wish I had one just like it.”

Old Mother Nature shook her head. “It wouldn't do, Peter, to trust you with a gun like Jimmy Skunk's,” said she. “You are altogether too heedless and careless. If you had a scent gun like Jimmy's, I am afraid there would be trouble in the Green Forest and on the Green Meadow all the time. I suspect that you would drive everybody else away. Jimmy is never heedless or careless. He never uses that little scent gun unless he is in real danger or thinks he is. Usually he is pretty sure that he is before he uses it. I'll venture to say that not one of you has seen Jimmy use that little scent gun.”

Peter looked at Jumper the Hare. Jumper looked at Chatterer. Chatterer looked at Happy Jack. Happy Jack looked at Danny Meadow Mouse. Danny looked at Striped Chipmunk. Striped looked at Johnny Chuck. Johnny looked at Whitefoot the Wood Mouse. Then all looked at Old Mother Nature and shook their heads. “I thought as much,” said she. “Jimmy is wonderfully well armed, but for defense only. He never makes the mistake of misusing that little scent gun. But everybody knows he has it, so nobody interferes with him. Now, Peter, what more do you know about Jimmy?”

“He's lazy,” replied Peter.

“I'm not lazy,” retorted Jimmy Skunk. “I'm no more lazy than you are. You call me lazy just because I don't hurry. I don't have to hurry, and I never can see any good in hurrying when one doesn't have to.”

“That will do,” interposed Old Mother Nature. “Go on, Peter, with what you know about Jimmy.” “He is good-natured,” said Peter, and grinned at Jimmy.

Jimmy grinned back. “Thank you, Peter,” said he.

“He is one of the best-natured people I know,” continued Peter. “I guess it is a lucky thing for the rest of us that he is. I have noticed that fat people are usually good-natured, and Jimmy is nearly always fat. In fact, I don't think I have seen him what you would call really thin excepting very early in the spring. He eats Beetles and grubs and Grasshoppers and Crickets and insects of all sorts. I am told that he steals eggs when he can find them.”

“Yes, and he catches members of my family when he can,” spoke up Danny Meadow Mouse. “I never feel safe with Jimmy Skunk very near.”

Jimmy didn't look at all put out. "I might as well confess that tender Mouse is rather to my liking," said he, "and I might add that I also enjoy a Frog now and then, or a Lizard or a fish."

"Also you might mention that young birds don't come amiss when you can get them," spoke up Chatterer the Red Squirrel maliciously.

Jimmy looked up at Chatterer. "That's a case of the pot calling the kettle black," said he and Chatterer made a face at him. But Chatterer said nothing more, for he knew that all the others knew that what Jimmy said was true: Chatterer had robbed many a nest of young birds.

"Is that all you know about Jimmy?" asked Old Mother Nature of Peter.

"I guess it is," replied Peter, "excepting that he lives in a hole in the ground, and I seldom see him out in winter. I rather think he sleeps all winter, the same as Johnny Chuck does."

"You've got another think coming, Peter," said Jimmy. "I sleep a lot during the winter, but I don't go into winter quarters until well after snow comes, and I don't sleep the way Johnny Chuck does. Sometimes I go out in winter and hunt around a little."

"Do you dig your house?" asked Old Mother Nature.

Jimmy shook his head. "Not when I can help myself," said he, "It is too much work. If I have to I do, but I would much rather use one of Johnny Chuck's old houses. His houses suit me first rate."

"I want you all to look at Jimmy very closely," said Old Mother Nature. "You will notice that he is about the size of Black Pussy, the Cat from Farmer Brown's, and that his coat is black with broad white stripes. But not all Skunks are marked alike. I dare say that no two of Jimmy's children would be exactly alike. I suspect that one or more might be all black, with perhaps a little bit of white on the tail. Notice that Jimmy's front feet have long, sharp claws. He uses these to dig out grubs and insects in the ground, and for pulling over sticks and stones in his search for beetles. Also notice that he places his feet on the ground very much as does Buster Bear. That big, bushy tail of his is for the purpose of warning folks. Jimmy never shoots that little scent gun without first giving warning. When that tail of his begins to go up in the air, wise people watch out.

"A lot of people make the mistake of thinking that Jimmy Skunk and his family do a great deal of harm. The truth is, they do a great deal of good to man. Once in a while they will make the mistake of stealing Chickens or eggs, but it is only once in a while. They make up for all they take in this way by the pests they destroy. Jimmy and Mrs. Skunk have a large family each year, usually from six to ten. Mrs. Skunk usually is living by herself when the babies are born, but when they are big enough to walk their father rejoins the family, and you may see them almost any pleasant evening starting out together to hunt for Grasshoppers, Beetles and other things. Often the whole family remains together the whole winter, not breaking up until spring. Jimmy is one of the neatest of all my little people and takes the best of care of his handsome coat. He isn't afraid of water and can swim if it is necessary. He does most of his hunting at night, sleeping during the day. He is one of the few little wild people who haven't been driven away by man, and often makes his home close to man's home.

"Jimmy has own cousins in nearly all parts of this great country. Way down in the Southwest is one called the Hog-nosed Skunk, one of the largest of the family. He gets his name because of the

shape of his nose and the fact that he roots in the ground the same as a hog. He is also called the Badger Skunk because of the big claws on his front feet and the fact that he is a great digger. His fur is not so fine as that of Jimmy Skunk, but is rather coarse and harsh. He is even more of an insect eater than is Jimmy.

“The smallest of Jimmy's own cousins is the Little Spotted Skunk. He is only about half as big as Jimmy, and his coat, instead of being striped with white like Jimmy's, is covered with irregular white lines and spots, making it appear very handsome. He lives in the southern half of the country and in habits is much like Jimmy, but he is much livelier. Occasionally he climbs low trees. Like Jimmy he eats almost anything he can find. And it goes without saying that, like Jimmy, he carries a little scent gun. By the way, Jimmy, what do you do when you are angry? Show us.”

Jimmy began to growl, a queer-sounding little growl, and at the same time to stamp the ground with his front feet. Old Mother Nature laughed. “When you see Jimmy do that,” said she, “it is best to pretend you don't see him and keep out of his way.”

“Hasn't Jimmy any enemies at all?” asked Peter Rabbit.

“That depends on how hungry some folks get,” replied Old Mother Nature. “Hooty the Owl doesn't seem to mind Jimmy's little scent gun, but this is the only one I can think of who doesn't. Some of the bigger animals might take him if they were starving, but even then I think they would think twice. Who knows where Digger the Badger is living?”

“I do,” replied Peter Rabbit. “He is living out on the Green Meadows over near the Old Pasture.”

“All right, Peter,” replied Old Mother Nature, “suppose you run over and pay him a visit and tomorrow morning you can tell us about it.”

Source:

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