

How Old Mr. Otter Learned to Slide

by Thornton W. Burgess

Little Joe Otter was having the jolliest kind of a time. Little Joe Otter is a jolly little chap, anyway, and just now he was extra happy. You see, he had a brand new slippery-slide. Yes, Sir, Little Joe had just built a new slippery-slide down the steepest part of the bank into the Smiling Pool. It was longer and smoother than his old slippery-slide, and it seemed to Little Joe as if he could slide and slide all day long. Of course he enjoyed it more because he had built it himself. He would stretch out full length at the top of the slippery-slide, give a kick to start himself, shoot down the slippery-slide, disappear headfirst with a great splash into the Smiling Pool, and then climb up the bank and do it all over again.

Peter Rabbit and Johnny Chuck sat watching him from the bank on the other side of the Smiling Pool. Right down below them, sitting on his big green lily-pad, was Grandfather Frog, and there was a sparkle in his big, goggly eyes and his great mouth was stretched in a broad grin as he watched Little Joe Otter. He even let a foolish green fly brush the tip of his nose and didn't snap at it.

"Chug-a-rum!" exclaimed Grandfather Frog to no one in particular. "That reminds me of the days when I was young and the greatest diver in the Smiling Pool. My goodness, it makes me feel young just to watch Little Joe shoot down that slippery-slide. If I weren't so old, I'd try it myself. Wheee!"

With that, Grandfather Frog suddenly jumped. It was a great, long, beautiful jump, and with his long hind legs straight out behind him, Grandfather Frog disappeared in the Smiling Pool so neatly that he made hardly a splash at all, only a whole lot of rings on the surface of the water that grew bigger and bigger until they met the rings made by Little Joe Otter and then became all mixed up.

Half a minute later Grandfather Frog's head bobbed up out of the water, and for the first time he saw Johnny Chuck and Peter Rabbit.

"Come on in; the water's fine!" he cried, and rolled one big, goggly eye up at jolly, round, bright Mr. Sun and winked it in the most comical way, for he knew, and he knew that Mr. Sun knew, just how Johnny Chuck and Peter Rabbit dislike the water.

"No, thanks," replied Peter, but there was a wistful look in his big eyes as he watched Little Joe Otter splash into the Smiling Pool. Little Joe was having such a good time! Peter actually was wishing that he *did* like the water.

Grandfather Frog climbed out on his big green lily-pad. He settled himself comfortably so as to face Johnny Chuck and Peter and at the same time watch Little Joe out of the corner of one big, goggly eye.

"Chug-a-rum!" said he, as once more Little Joe splashed into the Smiling Pool. "Did you ever hear about Little Joe's family secret?" he asked in his deep gruff voice.

"No," cried Peter Rabbit. "Do tell us about it! I just love secrets." There was a great deal of eagerness in Peter's voice, and it made Grandfather Frog smile.

"Is that the reason you never can keep them?" he asked.

Peter looked a wee bit foolish, but he kept still and waited patiently. After what seemed a long, long time, Grandfather Frog cleared his throat two or three times, and this is the story he told Johnny Chuck and Peter Rabbit:

"Once upon a time when the world was young, the great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather of Little Joe Otter got into a peck of trouble. Yes, Sir, he certainly did get into a peck of trouble. You see, it was winter, and everything was covered with snow, so that food was hard to get. Most of the little forest and

meadow people found little to eat, and it took a great deal of hunting to find that little. Only those who, like old Mr. Squirrel, had been wise enough to lay up a store of food when there was plenty, and two or three others like Mr. Mink and Mr. Otter, who could go fishing in the spring-holes which had not frozen over, had full stomachs.

"Now an empty stomach almost always makes a short temper. It is hard, very hard indeed to be hungry and good-natured at the same time. So as most of the people of the Green Forest were hungry all the time, they were also short-tempered all the time. Mr. Otter knew this. When any of them came prowling around the spring-hole where he was fishing, he would tease them by letting them see how fat he was. Sometimes he would bring up a fine fish and eat it right before them without offering to share so much as a mouthful. He had done this several times to Mr. Lynx, and though Mr. Lynx had begged and begged for just a bite, Mr. Otter had refused the teeniest, weeniest bit and had even made fun of Mr. Lynx for not being smart enough to get sufficient to eat.

"Now it happened that one fine morning Mr. Otter took it into his head to take a walk in the Green Forest. It was a beautiful morning, and Mr. Otter went farther than he intended. He was just trying to make up his mind whether to turn back or go just a little farther, when he heard stealthy footsteps behind him. He looked over his shoulder, and what he saw helped him to make up his mind in a hurry. There, creeping over the frozen snow, was Mr. Lynx, and the sides of Mr. Lynx were very thin, and the eyes of Mr. Lynx looked very hungry and fierce, and the claws of Mr. Lynx were very long and strong and cruel looking. Mr. Otter made up his mind right away that the cold, black water of that open spring-hole was the only place for him, and he started for it without even passing the time of day with Mr. Lynx.

"Now Mr. Otter's legs were very short, just as Little Joe's are, but it was surprising how fast he got over the snow that beautiful morning. When he came to the top of a little hill, he would slide down, because he found that he could go faster that way. But in spite of all he could do, Mr. Lynx traveled faster, coming with great jumps and snarling and spitting with every jump. Mr. Otter was almost out of breath when he reached the high bank just above the open spring-hole. It was very steep, very steep indeed. Mr. Otter threw a hasty glance over his shoulder. Mr. Lynx was so near that in one more jump he would catch him. There wasn't time to run around to the place where the bank was low. Mr. Otter threw himself flat, gave a frantic kick with his hind legs, shut his eyes, and shot down, down, down the slippery bank so fast that he lost what little breath he had left. Then he landed with a great splash in the cold, black water and was safe, for Mr. Lynx was afraid of the water. He stopped right on the very edge of the steep bank, where he growled and screeched and told Mr. Otter what dreadful things he would do to him if ever he caught him.

"Now in spite of his dreadful fright, Mr. Otter had enjoyed that exciting slide down the steep bank. He got to thinking about it after Mr. Lynx had slunk away into the Green Forest, and when he was rested and could breathe comfortably again, he made up his mind to try it once more. So he climbed out where the bank was low and ran around to the steep place and once more slid down into the water. It was great fun, the greatest fun Mr. Otter ever had had. He did it again and again. In fact, he kept doing it all the rest of that day. And he found that the more he slid, the smoother and more slippery became the slippery-slide, for the water dripped from his brown coat and froze on the slide.

"After that, as long as the snow lasted, Mr. Otter spent all his time, between eating and sleeping, sliding down his slippery-slide. He learned just how to hold his legs so that they would not be hurt. When gentle Sister South Wind came in the spring and took away all the snow, Mr. Otter hardly knew what to do with himself, until one day a bright idea popped into his head and made him laugh aloud. Why not make a slippery-slide of mud and clay? Right away he tried it. It wasn't as good as the snow slide, but by trying and trying, he found a way to make it better than at first. After that Mr. Otter was perfectly happy, for summer and winter he had a slippery-slide. He taught his children, and they taught their

children how to make slippery-slides, and ever since that long-ago day when the world was young, the making of slippery-slides has been the family secret of the Otters."

"And it's the best secret in the world," said Little Joe Otter, swimming up behind Grandfather Frog just then.

"I wish—I wish I had a slippery-slide," said Peter Rabbit wistfully.

"Chug-a-rum!" said Grandfather Frog. "Chug-a-rum! Be content with the blessings you have got, Peter Rabbit. Be content with the blessings you have got. No good comes of wishing for things which it never was meant that you should have. It is a bad habit and it makes discontent."

Source:

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