

## How Lightfoot the Deer Learned to Jump

by Thornton W. Burgess

It isn't often that Peter Rabbit is filled with envy. As a rule, Peter is very free from anything like envy. Usually he is quite content with the gifts bestowed upon him by Old Mother Nature, and if others have more than he has, he is glad for them and wastes no time fretting because he has not been so fortunate. But once in a great while Peter becomes really and truly envious. It was that way the first time he saw Lightfoot the Deer leap over a fallen tree, and ever after, when he saw Lightfoot, a little of that same feeling stirred in his heart. You see, Peter always had been very proud of his own powers of jumping. To be sure Jumper the Hare could jump higher and farther than he could, but Jumper is his own cousin, so it was all in the family, so to speak, and Peter didn't mind. But to see Lightfoot the Deer go sailing over the tops of the bushes and over the fallen trees as if he had springs in his legs was quite another matter.

"I wish I could jump like that," said Peter right out loud one day, as he stood with his hands on his hips watching Lightfoot leap over a pile of brush.

"Why don't you learn to?" asked Jimmy Skunk with a mischievous twinkle in the eye which Peter couldn't see. "Lightfoot couldn't always jump like that; he had to learn. Why don't you find out how? Probably Grandfather Frog knows all about it. He knows about almost everything. If I were you, I'd ask him."

"I—I—I don't just like to," replied Peter. "I've asked him so many questions that I am afraid he'll think me a nuisance. I tell you what, Jimmy, you ask him!" Peter's eyes brightened as he said this.

Jimmy chuckled. "No, you don't!" said he. "If there is anything you want to know from Grandfather Frog, ask him yourself. I don't want to know how Lightfoot learned to jump. He may jump over the moon, for all I care. Have you seen any fat beetles this morning, Peter?"

"No," replied Peter shortly. "I'm not interested in beetles. There may never be any fat beetles, for all I care."

Jimmy laughed. It was a good-natured, chuckling kind of a laugh. "Don't get huffy, Peter," said he. "Here's hoping that you learn how to jump like Lightfoot the Deer, and that I get a stomachful of fat beetles." With that Jimmy Skunk slowly ambled along down the Crooked Little Path.

Peter watched him out of sight, sighed, started for the dear Old Briar-patch, stopped, sighed again, and then headed straight for the Smiling Pool. Grandfather Frog was there on his big green lily-pad, and Peter wasted no time.

"How did Lightfoot the Deer learn to jump so splendidly, Grandfather Frog?" he blurted out almost before he had stopped running.

Grandfather Frog blinked his great, goggly eyes. "Chug-a-rum!" said he. "If you'll jump across the Laughing Brook over there where it comes into the Smiling Pool, I'll tell you."

Peter looked at the Laughing Brook in dismay. It was quite wide at that point. "I—I can't," he stammered.

"Then I can't tell you how Lightfoot learned to jump," replied Grandfather Frog, quite as if the matter were settled.

"I—I'll try!" Peter hastened to blurt out.

"All right. While you are trying, I'll see if I can remember the story," replied Grandfather Frog.

Peter went back a little so as to get a good start. Then he ran as hard as he knew how, and when he reached the bank of the Laughing Brook, he jumped with all his might. It was a good jump—a splendid jump—but it wasn't quite enough of a jump, and Peter landed with a great splash in the water! Grandfather Frog opened his great mouth as wide as he could, which is very wide indeed, and laughed until the tears rolled down from his great, goggly eyes. Jerry Muskrat and Billy Mink rolled over and over on the bank, laughing until their sides ached. Even Spotty the Turtle smiled, which is very unusual for Spotty.

Now Peter does not like the water, and though he can swim, he doesn't feel at all at home in it. He paddled for the shore as fast as he could, and in his heart was something very like anger. No one likes to be laughed at. Peter intended to start for home the very minute he reached the shore. But just before his feet touched bottom, he heard the great, deep voice of Grandfather Frog.

"That is just the way Lightfoot the Deer learned to jump—trying to do what he couldn't do and keeping at it until he could. It all happened a great while ago when the world was young." Grandfather Frog was talking quite as if nothing had happened, and he had never thought of laughing. Peter was so put out that he wanted to keep right on, but he just couldn't miss that story. His curiosity wouldn't let him. So he shook himself and then lay down in the sunniest spot he could find within hearing.

"Lightfoot's great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather was named Lightfoot too, and was not a whit less handsome than Lightfoot is now," continued Grandfather Frog in his best story-telling voice. "He had just such slim legs as Lightfoot has now and just such wonderful, branching horns. When he had the latter, he was not much afraid of anybody. Those enemies swift enough of foot to catch him he could successfully fight with his horns, and those too big and strong for him to fight were not swift enough to catch him. But there was a season in every year when he had no horns, as is the case with Lightfoot. You know, or ought to know, that every spring Lightfoot loses his horns and through the summer a new pair grows. It was so with Mr. Deer of that long-ago time, and when he lost those great horns, he felt very helpless and timid.

"Now old Mr. Deer loved the open meadows and spent most of his time there. When he had to run, he wanted nothing in the way of his slim legs. And how he could run! My, my, my, how he could run! But there were others who could run swiftly in those days too,—Mr. Wolf and Mr. Dog. Mr. Deer always had a feeling that some day one or the other would catch him. When he had his horns, this thought didn't worry him much, but when he had lost his horns, it worried him a great deal. He felt perfectly helpless then. 'The thing for me to do is to keep out of sight,' said he to himself, and so instead of going out on the meadows and in the open places, he hid among the bushes and in the brush on the edge of the Green Forest and behind the fallen trees in the Green Forest.

"But one thing troubled old Mr. Deer, who wasn't old then, you know. Yes, Sir, one thing troubled him a great deal. He couldn't run fast at all among the bushes and the fallen trees and the old logs. This was a new worry, and it troubled him almost as much as the old worry. He felt that he was in a dreadful fix. You see, hard times had come, and the big and strong were preying on the weak and small in order to

live.

"If I stay out on the meadows, I cannot fight if I am caught; and if I stay here, I cannot run fast if I am found by my enemies. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What shall I do?" cried Mr. Deer, as he lay hidden among the branches of a fallen hemlock-tree.

"Just at that very minute along came Mr. Hare, the great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather of your cousin Jumper. A big log was in his path, and he jumped over it as lightly as a feather. Mr. Deer watched him and sighed. If only he could jump like that in proportion to his size, he would just jump over the bushes and the fallen logs and the fallen trees instead of trying to run around them or squeeze between them. Right then he had an idea. Why shouldn't he learn to jump? He could try, anyway. So when he was sure that no one was around to see him, he practised jumping over little low bushes. At first he couldn't do much, but he kept trying and trying, and little by little he jumped higher. It was hard work, and he scraped his slim legs many times when he tried to jump over old logs and stumps.

"Now all this time some one had been watching him, though he didn't know it. It was Old Mother Nature. One day she stopped him as he was trotting along a path. 'What is this you are doing when you think no one is watching?' she demanded, looking very cross. 'Haven't I given you beauty and speed? And yet you are not satisfied!' Mr. Deer hung his head. Then suddenly he threw it up proudly and told Old Mother Nature that he had not complained, but that through his own efforts he was just trying to add to the blessings which he did have, and he explained why he wanted to learn to jump. Old Mother Nature heard him through. 'Let me see you jump over that bush,' she snapped crossly, pointing to a bush almost as high as Mr. Deer himself.

"Oh, I can't jump nearly as high as that!" he cried. Then tossing his head proudly, he added, 'But I'll try.' So just as Peter Rabbit tried to jump the Laughing Brook when he felt sure that he couldn't, Mr. Deer tried to jump the bush. Just imagine how surprised he was when he sailed over it without even touching the top of it with his hoofs! Old Mother Nature had given him the gift of jumping as a reward for his perseverance and because she saw that he really had need of it.

"So ever since that long-ago day, the Deer have lived where the brush is thickest and the Green Forest most tangled, because they are such great jumpers that they can travel faster there than their enemies, and they are no longer so swift of foot in the open meadows. Now, Peter, let's see you jump over the Laughing Brook."

What do you think Peter did? Why, he tried again, and laughed just as hard as the others when once more he landed in the water with a great splash.

Source:

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