

How Johnny Chuck Ran Away

by Thornton W. Burgess

Johnny Chuck stood on the doorstep of his house and watched old Mrs. Chuck start down the Lone Little Path across the Green Meadows towards Farmer Brown's garden. She had her market basket on her arm, and Johnny knew that when she returned it would be full of the things he liked best. But not even the thought of these could chase away the frown that darkened Johnny Chuck's face. He had never been to Farmer Brown's garden and he had begged very hard to go that morning with old Mrs. Chuck. But she had said "No. It isn't safe for such a little chap as you." And when Mrs. Chuck said "No," Johnny knew that she meant it, and that it was of no use at all to beg.

So he stood with his hands in his pockets and scowled and scowled as he thought of old Mrs. Chuck's very last words: "Now, Johnny, don't you dare put a foot outside of the yard until I get back."

Pretty soon along came Peter Rabbit. Peter was trying to jump over his own shadow. When he saw Johnny Chuck he stopped abruptly. Then he looked up at the blue sky and winked at jolly, round, red Mr. Sun. "Looks mighty showery 'round here," he remarked to no one in particular.

Johnny Chuck smiled in spite of himself. Then he told Peter Rabbit how he had got to stay at home and mind the house and couldn't put his foot outside the yard. Now Peter hasn't had the best bringing up in the world, for his mother has such a big family that she is kept busy just getting them something to eat. So Peter has been allowed to bring himself up and do just about as he pleases.

"How long will your mother be gone?" asked Peter.

"Most all the morning," said Johnny Chuck mournfully.

Peter hopped a couple of steps nearer. "Say, Johnny," he whispered, "how is she going to know whether you stay in the yard all the time or not, so long as you are here when she gets home? I know where there's the dandiest sweet-clover patch. We can go over there and back easy before old Mrs. Chuck gets home, and she won't know anything about it. Come on!"

Johnny Chuck's mouth watered at the thought of the sweet-clover, but still he hesitated, for Johnny Chuck had been taught to mind.

"'Fraid cat! 'Fraid cat! Tied to your mother's apron strings!" jeered Peter Rabbit.

"I ain't either!" cried Johnny Chuck. And then, just to prove it, he thrust his hands into his pockets and swaggered out into the Lone Little Path.

"Where's your old clover patch?" asked he.

"I'll show you," said Peter Rabbit, and off he started, lipperty-lipperty-lip, so fast that Johnny Chuck lost his breath trying to make his short legs keep up. And all the time Johnny's conscience was pricking him.

Peter Rabbit left the Lone Little Path across the Green Meadows for some secret little paths of

his own. His long legs took him over the ground very fast. Johnny Chuck, running behind him, grew tired and hot, for Johnny's legs are short and he is fat and roly-poly. At times all he could see was the white patch on the seat of Peter Rabbit's pants. He began to wish that he had minded old Mrs. Chuck and stayed at home. It was too late to go back now, for he didn't know the way.

"Wait up, Peter Rabbit!" he called.

Peter Rabbit just flirled his tail and ran faster.

"Please, please wait for me, Peter Rabbit," panted Johnny Chuck, and began to cry. Yes, Sir, he began to cry. You see he was so hot and tired, and then he was so afraid that he would lose sight of Peter Rabbit. If he did he would surely be lost, and then what should he do? The very thought made him run just a little faster.

Now Peter Rabbit is really one of the best-hearted little fellows in the world, just happy-go-lucky and careless. So when finally he looked back and saw Johnny Chuck way, way behind, with the tears running down his cheeks, and how hot and tired he looked, Peter sat down and waited. Pretty soon Johnny Chuck came up, puffing and blowing, and threw himself flat on the ground.

"Please, Peter Rabbit, is it very much farther to the sweet-clover patch?" he panted, wiping his eyes with the backs of his hands.

"No," replied Peter Rabbit, "just a little way more. We'll rest here a few minutes and then I won't run so fast."

So Peter Rabbit and Johnny Chuck lay down in the grass to rest while Johnny Chuck recovered his breath. Every minute or two Peter would sit up very straight, prick up his long ears and look this way and look that way as if he expected to see something unusual. It made Johnny Chuck nervous.

"What do you keep doing that for, Peter Rabbit?" he asked.

"Oh, nothin'," replied Peter Rabbit. But he kept right on doing it just the same. Then suddenly, after one of these looks abroad, he crouched down very flat and whispered in Johnny Chuck's ear in great excitement.

"Old Whitetail is down here and he's headed this way. We'd better be moving," he said.

Johnny Chuck felt a chill of fear. "Who is Old Whitetail?" he asked, as he prepared to follow Peter Rabbit.

"Don't you know?" asked Peter in surprise. "Say, you are green! Why, he's Mr. Marsh Hawk, and if he once gets the chance he'll gobble you up, skin, bones and all. There's an old stone wall just a little way from here, and the sooner we get there the better!"

Peter Rabbit led the way, and if he had run fast before it was nothing to the way he ran now. A great fear made Johnny Chuck forget that he was tired, and he ran as he had never run before in all his short life. Just as he dived head-first into a hole between two big stones, a shadow swept over the grass and something sharp tore a gap in the seat of his pants and made him squeal with fright and pain. But he wriggled in beside Peter Rabbit and was safe, while Mr. Marsh Hawk flew off with a scream of rage.

and disappointment.

Johnny Chuck had never been so frightened in all his short life. He made himself as small as possible and crept as far as he could underneath a friendly stone in the old wall. His pants were torn and his leg smarted dreadfully where one of Mr. Marsh Hawk's cruel, sharp claws had scratched him. How he did wish that he had minded old Mrs. Chuck and stayed in his own yard, as she had told him to.

Peter Rabbit looked at the tear in Johnny Chuck's pants. "Pooh!" said Peter Rabbit, "don't mind a little thing like that."

"But I'm afraid to go home with my pants torn," said Johnny Chuck.

"Don't go home," replied Peter Rabbit. "I don't unless I feel like it. You stay away a long time and then your mother will be so glad to see you that she won't ever think of the pants."

Johnny Chuck looked doubtful, but before he could say anything Peter Rabbit stuck his head out to see if the way was clear. It was, and Peter's long legs followed his head. "Come on, Johnny Chuck," he shouted. "I'm going over to the sweet-clover patch."

But Johnny Chuck was afraid. He was almost sure that Old Whitetail was waiting just outside to gobble him up. It was a long time before he would put so much as the tip of his wee black nose out. But without Peter Rabbit it grew lonelier and lonelier in under the old stone wall. Besides, he was afraid that he would lose Peter Rabbit, and then he would be lost indeed, for he didn't know the way home.

Finally Johnny Chuck ventured to peep out. There was jolly, round, red Mr. Sun smiling down just as if he was used to seeing little runaway chucks every day. Johnny looked and looked for Peter Rabbit, but it was a long time before he saw him, and when he did all he saw were Peter Rabbit's funny long ears above the tops of the waving grass, for Peter Rabbit was hidden in the sweet-clover patch, eating away for dear life.

It was only a little distance, but Johnny Chuck had had such a fright that he tried three times before he grew brave enough to scurry through the tall grass and join Peter Rabbit. My, how good that sweet-clover did taste! Johnny Chuck forgot all about Old Whitetail. He forgot all about his torn pants. He forgot that he had run away and didn't know the way home. He just ate and ate and ate until his stomach was so full he couldn't stuff another piece of sweet-clover into it.

Suddenly Peter Rabbit grabbed him by a sleeve and pulled him down flat.

"Sh-h-h," said Peter Rabbit, "don't move."

Johnny Chuck's heart almost stopped beating. What new danger could there be now? In a minute he heard a queer noise. Peeping between the stems of sweet-clover he saw—what do you think? Why, old Mrs. Chuck cutting sweet-clover to put in the basket of vegetables she was taking home from Farmer Brown's garden.

Johnny Chuck gave a great sigh of relief, but he kept very still for he did not want her to find him there after she had told him not to put foot outside his own dooryard. "You wait here," whispered

Peter Rabbit, and crept off through the clover. Pretty soon Johnny Chuck saw Peter Rabbit steal up behind old Mrs. Chuck and pull four big lettuce leaves out of her basket.

Source:

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