

Why Paddy the Beaver Has a Broad Tail

by Thornton W. Burgess

Usually the thing that interests us most is something that we haven't got ourselves. It is that way with Peter Rabbit. Peter is not naturally envious. Oh, my, no! Peter is pretty well satisfied with what he has, which is quite as it should be. There is only one thing with which Peter is really dissatisfied, and it is only once in a while, when he hasn't much of anything else to think about, that he is dissatisfied with this. Can you guess what it is? Well, it is his tail. Yes, Sir, that is the one thing that ever really troubles Peter.

You see, Peter's tail is, nothing but a funny little bunch of cotton, which doesn't look like a tail at all. The only time he ever sees it is when he is back to the Smiling Pool and looks over his shoulder at his reflection in the water, and then, of course, he really doesn't see his tail itself. So sometimes when Peter sees the fine tails of his neighbors, a little bit of envy creeps into his heart for just a little while. Why, even little Danny Meadow Mouse has a real tail, short as it is. And as for Happy Jack Squirrel and Reddy Fox and Bobby Coon and Jimmy Skunk, everybody knows what beautiful tails they have. Once Peter thought about it so much that Grandfather Frog noticed how sober he was and asked Peter what the trouble was. When Peter told him that it seemed to him that Old Mother Nature had not been fair in giving him such a foolish little tail when she had given others such beautiful ones, Grandfather Frog just opened his big mouth and laughed until he had to hold his sides.

"Why, Peter," said he, "you look so sober, that I thought you really had something to worry about. What would you do with a big tail, if you had one? It would always be in your way. Just think how many times Reddy Fox or old Granny Fox have almost caught you. They certainly would have before this, if you had had a long tail sticking out behind for them to get hold of. I had a long tail when I was young, and I was mighty glad to get rid of it."

After he heard that, Peter felt better. But he didn't lose interest in tails, and he spent a great deal of time in wondering why some of his neighbors had big, bushy tails and some had long, slim tails and why he himself had almost no tail at all. So when Paddy the Beaver came to live in the Green Forest, and made a pond there by building a wonderful dam across the Laughing Brook, the first thing Peter looked to see was what kind of a tail Paddy has, and the first time he got a good look at it, his eyes popped almost out of his head. He just stared and stared. He hardly noticed the wonderful dam or the equally wonderful canals which Paddy had made. All he could think of was that great, broad, flat, thick tail, which is so unlike any tail he had ever seen or heard of.

The very next morning he hurried over to the Smiling Pool to tell Grandfather Frog about it. Grandfather Frog's big, goggly eyes twinkled. "Chug-a-rum!" said he. "Paddy the Beaver has one of the most useful tails I know of. Would you like to know how he comes by such a queer tail?"

"Oh, if you please! If you please, Grandfather Frog! I didn't suppose there was such a queer tail in all the world, and I don't see what possible use it can be. Do tell me about it!" cried Peter.

"Chug-a-rum! If you had used your eyes when you visited Paddy, you might have guessed for yourself how he came by it," replied Grandfather Frog gruffly. "Some people never do learn to use their eyes."

Peter looked a bit sheepish, but he said nothing and waited patiently. Presently Grandfather Frog cleared his throat two or three times and began to talk.

"Once upon a time, long, long ago, when the world was young—"

"It seems to me that everything wonderful happened long ago when the world was young," interrupted Peter.

Grandfather Frog looked at Peter severely, and Peter hastened to beg his pardon.

After a long time Grandfather Frog began again.

"Once on a time, long, long ago, lived Mr. Beaver, the great-great-ever-so-great grandfather of Paddy up there in the Green Forest. Old Mr. Beaver was one of the hardest working of all of Old Mother Nature's big family and one of the smartest, just as Paddy is to-day. He always seemed happiest when he was busiest, and because he liked to be happy all the time, he tried to keep busy all the time.

"He was very thrifty, was Mr. Beaver; not at all like some people I know. He believed in preparing to-day for what might happen to-morrow, and so when he had all the food he needed for the present, he stored away food for the time when it might not be so easy to get. And he believed in helping himself, did Mr. Beaver, and not in leaving everything to Old Mother Nature, as did most of his neighbors. That is how he first came to think of making a dam and a pond. Like his small cousin, Mr. Muskrat, he was very fond of the water, and felt most at home and safest there. But he found that sometimes the food which he liked best, which was the bark of certain kinds of trees, grew some distance from the water, and it was the hardest kind of hard work to roll and drag the logs down to the water, where he could eat the bark from them in safety.

"He thought about this a great deal, but instead of going to Old Mother Nature and complaining, as most of his neighbors would have done in his place, he studied and studied to find some way to make the work easier. One day he noticed that a lot of sticks had caught in the stream where he made his home, and that because the water could not work its way between them as fast as where nothing hindered it, it made a little pool just above the sticks. That made him think harder than ever. He brought some of the logs and sticks from which he had gnawed the bark and fastened them with the others, and right away the pool grew bigger. The more sticks he added, the bigger the pool grew. Mr. Beaver had discovered what a dam is for and how to build it.

"'Why,' thought he, 'if I make a pond at the place nearest to my food trees, I can carry the water to the trees instead of the trees to the water; and that will be easier and ever so much safer as well.'

"So Mr. Beaver built a dam at just the right place, while all the other little people laughed at him and made fun of him for working so hard. Just as he had thought it would do, the dam made a pond, and the pond grew bigger and bigger, until it reached the very place where his food trees grew. Mr. Beaver built him a big, comfortable house out in the pond, and then he went to work as hard as ever he could to cut down trees and then cut them up into the right sized pieces to store away in his big food pile for the winter.

"Now cutting down trees is hard work. Yes, Siree, cutting down trees is the hardest kind of hard work. Mr. Beaver had to sit up on his hind legs to do it, and his legs grew very, very tired. In those days

he had a tail very much like the tail of Jerry Muskrat. It was very useful when he was swimming, but it was of no use at all at any other time. Sometimes he tried to brace himself with it—when he was sitting up to cut trees, and found it of no help. But he didn't complain; he just kept right on working, and only stopped to rest when his legs ached so that he had to.

"He was working just as usual one day when Old Mother Nature came along to see how he was getting on. She saw the new dam and the new pond, and she asked Mr. Beaver who had made them. He told her that he had and explained why. Old Mother Nature was greatly pleased, but she didn't say so. She just passed the time of day with him and then sat down to watch him cut a tree. She saw him try to brace himself with his useless tail, and she saw him stop to rest his tired legs.

"That looks to me like pretty hard work,' said Old Mother Nature.

"So it is,' replied Mr. Beaver, stretching first one leg and then another. 'But things worth having are worth working for,' and with that he began cutting again.

"You ought to have something to sit on,' said Old Mother Nature, her eyes twinkling.

"Mr. Beaver grinned. 'It would be very nice,' he confessed, 'but I never waste time wishing for things I haven't got and can't get,' and went right on cutting.

"The next morning when he awoke, he had the greatest surprise of his life. He had a new tail! It was broad and thick and flat. It wasn't like any tail he had ever seen or heard of. At first he didn't know how to manage it, but when he tried to swim, he found that it was even better than his old tail for swimming. He hurried over to begin his day's work, and there he made another discovery; his new tail was just the most splendid brace! It was almost like a stool to sit on, and he could work all day long without tiring his legs. Then was Mr. Beaver very happy, and to show how happy he was, he worked harder than ever. Later, he found that his new tail was just what he needed to pat down the mud with which he covered the roof of his house.

"Why,' he cried, 'I believe it is the most useful tail in all the world!'

"And then he wished with all his might that Old Mother Nature would return so that he might thank her for it. And that," concluded Grandfather Frog, "is how Mr. Beaver came by his broad tail. You see, Old Mother Nature always helps those who help themselves. And ever since that long-ago day, all Beavers have had broad tails, and have been the greatest workers in the world."

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "Why Paddy the Beaver Has a Broad Tail." *Mother West Wind 'Why' Stories*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1920. Electronic.