

How it Happens Johnny Chuck Sleeps All Winter

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit was bothered. He was bothered in his mind, and when Peter is bothered in his mind, he loses his appetite. It was so now. He had been up in the Old Orchard and, as is his way, had stopped at Johnny Chuck's for a bit of gossip. As he sat there talking, it suddenly came over him that Johnny was looking unusually fat. He said so. Johnny yawned in a very sleepy way as he replied:

"One has to get fat in order to sleep comfortably all winter. I've got to get fatter than I am now before I turn in." And with that, Johnny Chuck fell to eating as if his sides were falling in instead of threatening to burst, and Peter could get no more from him.

So he went home to think it over, and the more he thought, the more troubled he became. How could anybody sleep all winter? And what good did just getting fat do? Johnny Chuck couldn't eat his own fat, so what was the use of it? "Must be it's to keep him warm," thought Peter and brightened up. But why wasn't a good thick coat of fur just as good or even better? He didn't have any trouble keeping warm. Neither did Billy Mink or Little Joe Otter or Reddy Fox. No, it couldn't be that Johnny Chuck put on all that fat just to keep warm. Besides, he would spend the winter way down deep in the ground, and there was no excuse for being cold there.

"I couldn't sleep all winter if I wanted to, and I wouldn't if I could, for there is too much fun to miss," muttered Peter, as he started for the Smiling Pool in search of Grandfather Frog. He found him sitting on his big lily-pad, but somehow Grandfather Frog didn't look as chipper and smart as usual. "He certainly is growing old," thought Peter. "He isn't as spry as he used to be. Seems as if he had grown old in the last two or three weeks. Too bad, too bad."

Aloud, Peter said: "Why, Grandfather Frog, how well you are looking! You are enough to make us young fellows envious."

Grandfather Frog looked at Peter sharply. Perhaps he read the truth in Peter's eyes. "Chug-a-rum!" said he. "Be honest, Peter. Be honest. Don't try to flatter, because it is a bad habit to get into. I know how I look. I look old and tired. Now isn't that so?"

Peter looked a little shamefaced. He didn't know just what to say, so he said nothing and just nodded his head.

"That's better," said Grandfather Frog gruffly. "Always tell the truth. The fact is I *am* tired. I am so tired that I'm going to sleep for the winter, and I'm going to do it this very day."

"Oh, Grandfather Frog," (Peter had found his tongue), "please tell me something before you go. I can understand how you may want to sleep all winter because you have no nice fur coat to keep you warm, but why does Johnny Chuck do it, and how does he do it? Why doesn't he starve to death?"

Grandfather Frog had to smile at the eager curiosity in Peter's voice. "I see you are just as full of questions as ever, Peter," said he. "I suppose I may as well tell you one more story, because it will be a long time before you will get another from me. Johnny Chuck sleeps all winter because he is sensible, and he is sensible because it runs in the family to be sensible. His great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather

was sensible. It's a very good thing to have good sound common sense run in the family, Peter."

Once more Peter nodded his head. Jerry Muskrat, who was sitting on the Big Rock, listening, winked at Peter, and Peter winked back. Then he made himself comfortable and prepared not to miss a word of Grandfather Frog's story.

"You must know, Peter, that a long time ago when the world was young, there was a time when there was no winter," began Grandfather Frog. "That was before the hard times of which I have told you before. Everybody had plenty to eat, and everybody was on the best of terms with all his neighbors. Then came the hard times, and the beginning of the hard times was the coming of rough Brother North Wind and Jack Frost. Their coming made the first winter. It wasn't a very long or a very hard winter, but it was long enough and hard enough to make a great deal of discomfort, particularly for those little people who lived altogether on tender young green plants. Yes, Sir, it certainly was hard on them. Some of them nearly starved to death that first winter, short as it was. Old Mr. Chuck, who, of course, wasn't old then, was one of them. By the time the tender, young, green things began to grow again, he was just a shadow of what he used to be. He was so thin that sometimes he used to listen to see if he couldn't hear his bones rattle inside his skin.

"Of course he couldn't, but he was quite sure that when the wind blew, it went right through him. At last warm weather returned, just as it does now every summer, and once more there was plenty to eat. Some of the little people seemed to forget all about the hard times of the cold weather, but not Mr. Chuck. He had been too cold and too hungry to ever forget. Of course, with plenty to eat, he soon grew fat and comfortable again, but all the time he kept thinking about the terrible visit of rough Brother North Wind and Jack Frost and wondering if they would come again. He talked about it with his neighbors but most of them laughed and told him that he was borrowing trouble, and that they didn't believe that Brother North Wind and Jack Frost ever would come again.

"So after a while Mr. Chuck kept his thoughts to himself and went about his business as usual. But all the time he was turning over and over in his mind the possibility of another period of cold and starvation and trying to think of some way to prepare for it. He didn't once think of going to Old Mother Nature and begging her to take care of him, for he was very independent, was Mr. Chuck, and believed that those are best helped who help themselves. So he kept studying and studying how he could live through another cold spell, if it should come.

"I haven't got as thick a fur coat as Mr. Mink or Mr. Otter or Mr. Squirrel or some others, and I can't run around as fast as they can, so of course I can't keep as warm,' said he to himself, as he sat taking a sun-bath one day. 'I must find some other way of keeping warm. Now I don't believe the cold can get very deep down in the ground, so if I build me a house way down deep in the ground, it always will be comfortable. Anyway, it never will be very cold. I believe that is a good idea. I'll try it at once.'

"So without wasting any time, Mr. Chuck began to dig. He dug and he dug and he dug. When his neighbors grew curious and asked questions, he smiled good-naturedly and said that he was trying an experiment. When he had made a long hall which went down so deep that he was quite sure that Jack Frost could not get down there, he made a bedroom and put in it a bed of soft grass. When it was finished, he was so pleased with it that he retired to it every night as soon as the sun went down and didn't come out again until morning.

"Anyway, I won't freeze to death,' said he. Then he sighed as he remembered how hungry, how terribly hungry he had been. 'Now if only I can think of some way to get food enough to carry me

through, I'll be all right.'

"At first he thought of storing up food, but when he tried that, he soon found that the tender green things on which he lived wouldn't keep. They shriveled and dried, so that he couldn't eat them at all. He was still trying to think of some plan when Old Mother Nature sent warning that rough Brother North Wind and Jack Frost were coming again. Mr. Chuck's heart sank. He thought of how soon all the tender green things would disappear. Right then an idea was born in Mr. Chuck's head. He would eat all he could while he could, and then he would go down into his bedroom and sleep just as long as he could!

"So day after day he spent stuffing himself, and his neighbors called him Mr. Greedy. But he didn't mind that. He kept right on eating, and of course he grew fatter and fatter, so that at last he was so fat he could hardly get about. The days grew cooler and cooler, and then Mr. Chuck noticed that because he was so fat, he didn't feel the cold as he had before. There came a morning at last when Mr. Chuck stuck his nose out to find Jack Frost waiting to pinch it. All the tender green things were black and dead. Back to his bed scrambled Mr. Chuck and curled up to sleep just as long as he could. He made up his mind that he wouldn't worry until he had to. He had done his best, and that was all he could do.

"When Old Mother Nature came to see how the little people were faring, she missed Mr. Chuck. She asked his neighbors what had become of him, but no one knew. At length she came to his house and looking inside found him fast asleep. She saw right away what he had done and how fat he had grown. She knew without being told what it all meant, and the idea amused her. Instead of waking him, as she had at first intended to do, she touched Mr. Chuck and put him into a deeper sleep, saying:

"You shall sleep, Mr. Chuck,
Through the time of frost and snow.
For your courage and your pluck
You shall no discomfort know.'

"And so Mr. Chuck slept on until the tender young green things began once more to grow. The cold could not reach him, and the fat he had stored under his skin took the place of food. When he awoke in the spring, he knew nothing of the hard times his neighbors were talking about. And ever since then the Chuck family has slept through the winter, because it is the most comfortable and sensible thing to do. I know, because I have done the same thing for years. Good-by, Peter Rabbit! No more stories until spring."

Before Peter could say a word, there was a splash in the Smiling Pool, and Grandfather Frog was nowhere to be seen.

"I—I don't see how they do it," said Peter, shaking his head in a puzzled way as he slowly hopped towards the dear Old Briar-patch.

Source:

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