

Why Reddy Fox Wears Red

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit sat in the middle of the dear Old Briar-patch making faces and laughing at Reddy Fox. Of course that wasn't a nice thing to do, not a bit nice. But Peter had just had a narrow escape, a very narrow escape, for Reddy Fox had sprung out from behind a bush as Peter came down the Lone Little Path, and had so nearly caught Peter that he had actually pulled some fur out of Peter's coat. Now Peter was safe in the dear Old Briar-patch. He was a little out of breath, because he had had to use his long legs as fast as he knew how, but he was safe. You see, Reddy Fox wouldn't run the risk of tearing his handsome red coat on the brambles. Besides, they scratched terribly.

"Never mind, Peter Rabbit, I'll get you yet!" snarled Reddy, as he gave up and started back for the Green Forest.

"Reddy Fox is very sly!
Reddy Fox is very spry!
But sly and spry, 'tis vain to try
To be as sly and spry as I."

When Peter Rabbit shouted this, Reddy looked back and showed all his teeth, but Peter only laughed, and Reddy trotted on. Peter watched him out of sight.

"My! I wish I had such a handsome coat," he said, with a long sigh, for you know Peter's coat is very plain, very plain, indeed.

"You wouldn't, if you had to wear it for the same reason that Reddy Fox has to wear his. A good heart and honest ways are better than fine clothes, Peter Rabbit."

Peter looked up. There was saucy, pert, little Jenny Wren fussing around in one of the old bramble bushes.

"Hello, Jenny!" said Peter. "Why does Reddy wear a red coat?"

"Do you mean to say that you don't know?" Jenny Wren looked very hard at Peter with her sharp eyes. "I thought everybody knew that! You certainly are slow, Peter Rabbit. I haven't time to tell you about it now. Go ask Grandfather Frog; he knows all about it." Jenny Wren bustled off before Peter could find his tongue.

Now, you all know how full of curiosity Peter Rabbit is. Jenny Wren's busy tongue had set that curiosity fairly boiling over. He just couldn't sit still for wondering and wondering why Reddy Fox wears a red coat. He had never thought anything about it before, but now he couldn't get it out of his head. He just *had* to know. So, making sure that Reddy Fox had disappeared in the Green Forest, Peter started for the Smiling Pool, lipperty-lipperty-lip, as fast as he could go. There he found Grandfather Frog setting on his big green lily-pad, just as usual.

"If you please, Grandfather Frog, why does Reddy Fox wear a red coat?" panted Peter, quite out of breath.

"Chug-a-rum!" grunted Grandfather Frog crossly. "Don't you know that it is very impolite to disturb people when they are having a nap?"

"I—I'm very sorry. Indeed I am, Grandfather Frog," said Peter very humbly. "Will you tell me if I come again some time when you are not so sleepy?"

Now, like everybody else, Grandfather Frog is rather fond of Peter Rabbit, and now Peter looked so truly sorry, and at the same time there was such a look of disappointment in Peter's eyes, that Grandfather Frog forgot all about his crossness.

"Chug-a-rum!" said he. "You and your questions are a nuisance, Peter Rabbit, and I may as well get rid of you now as to have you keep coming down here and pestering me to death. Besides, any one who has to keep such a sharp watch for Reddy Fox as you do ought to know why he wears a red coat. If you'll promise to sit perfectly still and ask no foolish questions, I'll tell you the story."

Of course Peter promised, and settled himself comfortably to listen. And this is the story that Grandfather Frog told:

"A long time ago, when the world was young, old Mr. Fox, the grandfather a thousand times removed of Reddy Fox, was one of the smartest of all the forest and meadow people, just as Reddy is now. He was so smart that he knew enough not to appear smart, and the fact is his neighbors thought him rather dull. He wore just a common, everyday suit of dull brown, like most of the others, and there wasn't anything about him to attract attention. He was always very polite, very polite indeed, to every one. Yes, Sir, Mr. Fox was very polite. He always seemed to be minding his own business, and he never went around asking foolish questions or poking his nose into other people's affairs."

Grandfather Frog stopped a minute and looked very hard at Peter after he said this, and Peter looked uncomfortable.

"Now, although Mr. Fox didn't appear to take any interest in other people's affairs and never asked questions, he had two of the sharpest ears among all the little meadow and forest people, and while he was going about seeming to be just minding his own business, he was listening and listening to all that was said. Everything he heard he remembered, so that it wasn't long before he knew more about what was going on than all his neighbors together. But he kept his mouth tight closed, did Mr. Fox, and was very humble and polite to everybody. Every night he came home early and went to bed by sundown, and everybody said what good habits Mr. Fox had.

"But when everybody else was asleep, Mr. Fox used to steal out and be gone half the night. Yes, Sir, sometimes he'd be gone until almost morning. But he always took care to get home before any of his neighbors were awake, and then he'd wait until everybody was up before he showed himself. When he came out and started to hunt for his breakfast, some one was sure to tell him of mischief done during the darkness of the night. Sometimes it was a storehouse broken into, and the best things taken. Sometimes it was of terrible frights that some of the littlest people had received by being wakened in the night and seeing a fierce face with long, sharp teeth grinning at them. Sometimes it was of worse things that were told in whispers. Mr. Fox used to listen as if very much shocked, and say that something ought to be done about it, and wonder who it could be who would do such dreadful things.

"By and by things got so bad that they reached the ears of Old Mother Nature, and she came to

find out what it all meant. Now, the very night before she arrived, Mrs. Quack, who lived on the river bank, had a terrible fright. Somebody sprang upon her as she was sleeping, and in the struggle she lost all her tail feathers. She hurried to tell Old Mother Nature all about it, and big tears rolled down her cheeks as she told how she had lost all her beautiful tail feathers. Mother Nature called all the people of the forest and the meadows together. She made them all pass before her, and she looked sharply at each one as they went by. Mr. Fox looked meeker than ever, and he was very humble and polite.

"Now when Mr. Fox had paid his respects and turned his back, Old Mother Nature saw something red on the tail of his coat. It was nothing but a little smear of red clay, but that was enough for Old Mother Nature. You see, she knew that Mrs. Quack's home was right at the foot of a red claybank. She didn't say a word until everybody had paid their respects and passed before her. Then she told them how grieved she was to hear of all the trouble there had been, but that she couldn't watch over each one all the time; they must learn to watch out for themselves.

"And so that you may know who to watch out for, from now on never trust the one who wears a bright red coat," concluded Old Mother Nature.

"All of a sudden Mr. Fox became aware that everybody was looking at him, and in every face was hate. He glanced at his coat. It was bright red! Then Mr. Fox knew that he had been found out, and he sneaked away with his tail between his legs. The first chance he got, he went to Old Mother Nature and begged her to give him back his old coat. She promised that she would when his heart changed, and he changed his ways. But his heart never did change, and his children and his children's children were just like him. They have always been the smartest and the sliest and the most feared and disliked of all the little people on the meadows or in the forest. And now you know why Reddy Fox wears a red coat," concluded Grandfather Frog.

Peter Rabbit drew a long breath. "Thank you, thank you, Grandfather Frog!" said he. "I—I think hereafter I'll be quite content with my own suit, even if it isn't handsome. Jenny Wren was right. A good heart and honest ways are better than fine clothes."

Source:

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