

Why Reddy Fox Has No Friends

by Thornton W. Burgess

The Green Meadows lay peaceful and still. Mother Moon, sailing high overhead, looked down upon them and smiled and smiled, flooding them with her silvery light. All day long the Merry Little Breezes of Old Mother West Wind had romped there among the asters and goldenrod. They had played tag through the cat rushes around the Smiling Pool. For very mischief they had rubbed the fur of the Field Mice babies the wrong way and had blown a fat green fly right out of Grandfather Frog's mouth just as his lips came together with a smack. Now they were safely tucked in bed behind the Purple Hills, and so they missed the midnight feast at the foot of the Lone Pine.

But Reddy Fox was there. You can always count on Reddy Fox to be about when mischief or good times are afoot, especially after Mr. Sun has pulled his nightcap on.

Jimmy Skunk was there. If there is any mischief Reddy Fox does not think of Jimmy Skunk will be sure to discover it.

Billy Mink was there. Yes indeed, Billy Mink was there! Billy Mink is another mischief maker. When Reddy Fox and Jimmy Skunk are playing pranks or in trouble of any kind you are certain to find Billy Mink close by. That is, you are certain to find him if you look sharp enough. But Billy Mink is so slim, he moves so quickly, and his wits are so sharp, that he is not seen half so often as the others.

With Billy Mink came his cousin, Shadow the Weasel, who is sly and cruel. No one likes Shadow the Weasel.

Little Joe Otter and Jerry Muskrat came. They were late, for the legs of Little Joe Otter are so short that he is a slow traveler on land, while Jerry Muskrat feels much more at home in the water than on the dry ground.

Of course Peter Rabbit was there. Without him no party on the Green Meadows would be complete, and Peter likes to be abroad at night even better than by day. With Peter came his cousin, Jumper the Hare, who had come down from the Pine Forest for a visit.

Boomer the Nighthawk and Hooty the Owl completed the party, though Hooty had not been invited and no one knew that he was there.

Each was to contribute something to the feast—the thing that he liked best. Such an array as Mother Moon looked down upon! Reddy Fox had brought a plump, tender chicken, stolen from Farmer Brown's dooryard.

Very quietly, like a thin, brown shadow, Billy Mink had slipped up to the duck pond and—alas! Now Mother Quack had one less in her pretty little flock than when as jolly, round, red Mr. Sun went to bed behind the Purple Hills, she had counted her babies as they tucked their heads under their wings.

Little Joe Otter had been fishing and he brought a great fat brother of the lamented Tommy Trout, who didn't mind.

Jerry Muskrat brought up from the mud of the river bottom some fine fresh water clams, of which he is very fond.

Jimmy Skunk stole three big eggs from the nest of old Gray Goose.

Peter Rabbit and Jumper the Hare rolled up a great, tender, fresh cabbage.

Boomer the Nighthawk said that he was very sorry, but he was on a diet of insects, which he must swallow one at a time, so to save trouble he had swallowed them as he caught them.

Now Hooty the Owl is a glutton and is lazy. "Reddy Fox and Jimmy Skunk and Billy Mink are sure to bring something I like, so what is the use of spending my time hunting for what someone else will get for me?" said he to himself. So Hooty the Owl went very early to the Lone Pine and hid among the thick branches where no one could see him.

Shadow the Weasel is sly and a thief and lives by his wits. So because he had rather steal than be honest, he too went to the midnight spread with nothing but his appetite.

Now Reddy Fox is also a glutton and very, very crafty. When he saw the plump duck brought by Billy Mink, his mouth watered, for Reddy Fox is very, very fond of young spring ducks. So straightway he began to plan how he could get possession of Billy Mink's duck.

And when Billy Mink saw the fat trout Little Joe Otter had brought, his eyes danced and his heart swelled with envy, for Billy Mink is very, very fond of fish. At once he began to plan how he could secure that particular fat trout Little Joe Otter guarded so carefully.

Jimmy Skunk was quite contented with the eggs he had stolen from old Gray Goose—that is, he was until he saw the plump chicken Reddy Fox had brought from Farmer Brown's dooryard. Then suddenly his stomach became very empty, very empty indeed for chicken, and Jimmy Skunk began to think of a way to add the chicken of Reddy Fox to his own stolen eggs.

Because Reddy Fox is the largest he was given the place of honor at the head of the table under the Lone Pine. On his right sat Little Joe Otter and on his left Jerry Muskrat. Shadow the Weasel was next to Little Joe Otter, while right across from him was Jimmy Skunk. Peter Rabbit was next, sitting opposite his cousin, Jumper the Hare. At the extreme end, facing Reddy Fox, sat Billy Mink, with the plump duck right under his sharp little nose.

Boomer the Nighthawk excused himself on the plea that he needed exercise to aid digestion, and as he had brought nothing to the feast, his excuse was politely accepted.

Reddy Fox is very, very cunning, and his crafty brain had been busily working out a plan to get all these good things for himself. "Little brothers of the Green Meadows," began Reddy Fox, "we have met here to-night for a feast of brotherly love."

Reddy Fox paused a moment to look hungrily at Billy Mink's duck. Billy Mink cast a longing eye at Little Joe Otter's trout, while Jimmy Skunk stole an envious glance at Reddy Fox's chicken.

"But there is one missing to make our joy complete," continued Reddy Fox. "Who has seen Bobby Coon?"

No one had seen Bobby Coon. Somehow happy-go-lucky Bobby Coon had been overlooked when the invitations were sent out.

"I move," continued Reddy Fox, "that because Billy Mink runs swiftly, and because he knows where Bobby Coon usually is to be found, he be appointed a committee of one to find Bobby Coon and bring him to the feast."

Now nothing could have been less to the liking of Billy Mink, but there was nothing for him to do but to yield as gracefully as he could and go in search of Bobby Coon.

No sooner had Billy Mink disappeared down the Lone Little Path than Reddy Fox recalled a nest of grouse eggs he had seen that day under a big hemlock, and he proposed that inasmuch as Jimmy Skunk already wore stripes for having stolen a nest of eggs from Mrs. Grouse, he was just the one to go steal these eggs and bring them to the feast.

Of course there was nothing for Jimmy Skunk to do but to yield as gracefully as he could and go in search of the nest of eggs under the big hemlock.

No sooner had Jimmy Skunk started off than Reddy Fox remembered a big shining sucker Farmer Brown's boy had caught that afternoon and tossed among the rushes beside the Smiling Pool. Little Joe Otter listened and his mouth watered and watered until he could sit still no longer. "If you please," said Little Joe Otter, "I'll run down to the Smiling Pool and get that sucker to add to the feast."

No sooner was Little Joe Otter out of sight than Reddy Fox was reminded of a field of carrots on the other side of the Green Meadows. Now Peter Rabbit and Jumper the Hare are very fond of tender young carrots and they volunteered to bring a supply for the feast. So away they hurried with big jumps down the Lone Little Path and out across the Green Meadows.

No sooner were Peter Rabbit and Jumper the Hare fairly started than Reddy Fox began to tell of some luscious sweet apples he had noticed under a wild apple tree a little way back on the hill. Now Jerry Muskrat is quite as fond of luscious sweet apples as of fresh-water clams, so quietly slipping away, he set out in quest of the wild apple tree a little way back on the hill.

No sooner was Jerry Muskrat lost in the black shadows than Reddy Fox turned to speak to Shadow the Weasel. But Shadow the Weasel believes that a feast in the stomach is worth two banquets untasted, so while the others had been talking, he had quietly sucked dry the three big eggs stolen by Jimmy Skunk from old Gray Goose, and then because he is so slim and so quick and so sly, he slipped away without anyone seeing him.

So when Reddy Fox turned to speak to Shadow the Weasel, he found himself alone. At least he thought himself alone, and he smiled a wicked, selfish smile as he walked over to Billy Mink's duck. He was thinking how smart he had been to get rid of all the others, and of how he would enjoy the feast all by himself.

As Reddy Fox stooped to pick up Billy Mink's duck, a great shadow dropped softly, oh so softly, out of the Lone Pine down onto the plump chicken. Then without the teeniest, weeniest bit of noise, it floated back into the Lone Pine and with it went the plump chicken.

Reddy Fox, still with his wicked, selfish smile, trotted back with Billy Mink's duck, but he dropped it in sheer surprise when he discovered that his plump chicken had disappeared. Now Reddy Fox is very suspicious, as people who are not honest themselves are very apt to be. So he left Billy Mink's duck where he had dropped it and trotted very, very softly up the Lone Little Path to try to catch the thief who had stolen his plump chicken.

No sooner was his back turned than down out of the Lone Pine floated the great shadow, and when a minute later Reddy Fox returned, Billy Mink's duck had also disappeared.

Reddy Fox could hardly believe his eyes. He didn't smile now. He was too angry and too frightened. Yes, Reddy Fox was frightened. He walked in a big circle round and round the place where the plump chicken and the duck had been, and the more he walked, the more suspicious he became. He wrinkled and wrinkled his little black nose in an effort to smell the intruder, but not a whiff could he get. All was as still and peaceful as could be. Little Joe Otter's trout lay shining in the moonlight. The big head of cabbage lay just where Peter Rabbit and Jumper the Hare had left it. Reddy Fox rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was not dreaming and that the plump chicken and the duck were not there too.

Just then Bowser the Hound, over at Farmer Brown's, bayed at the moon. Reddy Fox always is nervous and by this time he was so fidgety that he couldn't stand still. When Bowser the Hound bayed at the moon Reddy Fox jumped a foot off the ground and whirled about in the direction of Farmer Brown's house. Then he remembered that Bowser the Hound is always chained up at night, so that he had nothing to fear from him.

After listening and looking a moment Reddy Fox decided that all was safe. "Well," said he to himself, "I'll have that fat trout anyway," and turned to get it.

But the fat trout he had seen a minute before shining in the moonlight had also disappeared. Reddy Fox looked and looked until his eyes nearly popped out of his head. Then he did what all cowards do—ran home as fast as his legs could carry him.

Now of course Billy Mink didn't find Bobby Coon, and when he came back up the Lone Little Path he was very tired, very hungry and very cross. And of course Jimmy Skunk failed to find the nest of Mrs. Grouse, and Little Joe Otter could find no trace of the shining big sucker among the rushes beside the Smiling Pool. They also were very tired, very hungry and very cross.

When the three returned to the Lone Pine and found nothing there but the big head of cabbage, which none of them liked, the empty egg shells of old Gray Goose and Jerry Muskrat's clams, they straightway fell to accusing each other of having stolen the duck and the fat trout and the eggs and began to quarrel dreadfully.

Pretty soon up came Peter Rabbit and Jumper the Hare, who had failed to find the tender young carrots. And up came Jerry Muskrat, who had found no luscious sweet apples.

"Where is Reddy Fox?" asked Peter Rabbit.

Sure enough, where was Reddy Fox? Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter and Jimmy Skunk stopped quarreling and looked at each other.

"Reddy Fox is the thief!" they cried all together.

Peter Rabbit and Jumper the Hare and Jerry Muskrat agreed that Reddy Fox must be the thief, and had sent them all away on false errands that he might have the feast all to himself.

So because there was nothing else to do, Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter, tired and hungry and angry, started for their homes beside the Laughing Brook. And Jimmy Skunk, also tired and hungry and angry, started off up the Crooked Little Path to look for some beetles.

But Peter Rabbit and Jumper the Hare sat down to enjoy the big head of cabbage, while close beside them sat Jerry Muskrat smacking his lips over his clams, they tasted so good. Mother Moon looked down and smiled and smiled, for she knew that each had a clear conscience, for they had done no harm to anyone.

And up in the thick top of the great pine Hooty the Owl nodded sleepily, for his stomach was very full of chicken and duck and trout, although he had not been invited to the party.

And this is why Reddy Fox has no true friends on the Green Meadows.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "Why Reddy Fox Has No Friends." *Mother West Wind's Children*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1911. Electronic.