

How Old Mr. Toad Learned to Sing

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit never will forget how he laughed the first time he heard Old Mr. Toad say that he could sing and was going to sing. Why, Peter would as soon think of singing himself, and that is something he can no more do than he can fly. Peter had known Old Mr. Toad ever since he could remember. He was rather fond of him, even if he did play jokes on him once in a while. But he always thought of Old Mr. Toad as one of the homeliest of all his friends,—slow, awkward, and too commonplace to be very interesting. So when, in the glad joyousness of the spring, Old Mr. Toad had told Jimmy Skunk that he was going down to the Smiling Pool to sing because without him the great chorus there would lack one of its sweetest voices, Peter and Jimmy had laughed till the tears came.

A few days later Peter happened over to the Smiling Pool for a call on Grandfather Frog. A mighty chorus of joy from unseen singers rose from all about the Smiling Pool. Peter knew about those singers. They were Hylas, the little cousins of Sticky-toes the Tree Toad. Peter sat very still on the edge of the bank trying to see one of them. Suddenly he became aware of a new note, one he never had noticed before and sweeter than any of the others. Indeed it was one of the sweetest of all the spring songs, as sweet as the love notes of Tommy Tit the Chickadee, than which there is none sweeter.

It seemed to come from the shallow water just in front of Peter, and he looked eagerly for the singer. Then his eyes opened until it seemed as if they would pop right out of his head, and he dropped his lower jaw foolishly. There was Old Mr. Toad with a queer bag Peter never had seen before swelled out under his chin, and as surely as Peter was sitting on that bank, it was Old Mr. Toad who was the sweet singer!

Old Mr. Toad paid no attention to Peter, not even when he was spoken to. He was so absorbed in his singing that he just didn't hear. Peter sat there a while to listen; then he called Jimmy Skunk and Unc' Billy Possum, who were also listening to the music, and they were just as surprised as Peter. Then he spied Jerry Muskrat at the other end of the Smiling Pool and hurried over there. Peter was so full of the discovery he had made that he could think of nothing else. He fairly ached to tell.

"Jerry!" he cried. "Oh, Jerry Muskrat! Do you know that Old Mr. Toad can sing?"

Jerry looked surprised that Peter should ask such a question. "Of course I know it," said he. "It would be mighty funny if I didn't know it, seeing that he is the sweetest singer in the Smiling Pool and has sung here every spring since I can remember."

Peter looked very much chagrined. "I didn't know it until just how," he confessed. "I didn't believe him when he told me that he could sing. I wonder how he ever learned."

"He didn't learn any more than you learned how to jump," replied Jerry. "It just came to him naturally. His father sang, and his grandfather, and his great grandfather, way back to the beginning of things. I thought everybody knew about that."

"I don't. Tell me about it. Please do, Jerry," begged Peter.

"All right, I will," replied Jerry good-naturedly. "It's something you ought to know about,

anyway. In the first place, Old Mr. Toad belongs to a very old and honorable family, one of the very oldest. I've heard say that it goes way back almost to the very beginning of things when there wasn't much land. Anyway, the first Toad, the great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather of Old Mr. Toad and own cousin to the great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather of Grandfather Frog, was one of the first to leave the water for the dry land.

"Old Mother Nature met him hopping along and making hard work of it because, of course, it was so new. She looked at him sharply. 'What are you doing here?' she demanded. 'Aren't you contented with the water where you were born?'"

"Mr. Toad bowed very low. 'Yes'm,' said he very humbly. 'I'll go right back there if you say so. I thought there must be some things worth finding out on the land, and that I might be of some use in the Great World.'

"His answer pleased Old Mother Nature. She was worried. She had planted all kinds of things on the land, and they were springing up everywhere, but she had discovered that bugs of many kinds liked the tender green things and were increasing so fast and were so greedy that they threatened to strip the land of all that she had planted. She had so many things to attend to that she hadn't time to take care of the bugs. 'If you truly want to be of some use,' said she, 'you can attend to some of those bugs.'

"Mr. Toad went right to work, and Old Mother Nature went about some other business. Having so many other things to look after, she quite forgot about Mr. Toad, and it was several weeks before she came that way again. Right in the middle of a great bare place where the bugs had eaten everything was a beautiful green spot, and patiently hopping from plant to plant was Mr. Toad, snapping up every bug he could see. He didn't see Old Mother Nature and kept right on working. She watched him a while as he hopped from plant to plant catching bugs as fast as he could, and then she spoke.

"'Have you stayed right here ever since I last saw you?' she asked.

"Mr. Toad gave a start of surprise. 'Yes'm,' said he.

"'But I thought you wanted to see the Great World and learn things,' said she.

"Mr. Toad looked a little embarrassed. 'So I did,' he replied, 'but I wanted to be of some use, and the bugs have kept me so busy there was no time to travel. Besides, I have learned a great deal right here. I—I couldn't get around fast enough to save *all* the plants, but I have saved what I could.'

"Old Mother Nature was more pleased than she was willing to show, for Mr. Toad was the first of all the little people who had tried to help her, and he had done what he could willingly and faithfully.

"'I suppose,' said she, speaking a little gruffly, 'you expect me to reward you.'

"Mr. Toad looked surprised and a little hurt. 'I don't want any reward,' said he. 'I didn't do it for that. It will be reward enough to know that I really have helped and to be allowed to continue to help.'

"At that Old Mother Nature's face lighted with one of her most beautiful smiles. 'Mr. Toad,' said she, 'if you could have just what you want, what would it be?'"

"Mr. Toad hesitated a few minutes and then said shyly, 'A beautiful voice.'

"It was Old Mother Nature's turn to look surprised. 'A beautiful voice!' she exclaimed. 'Pray, why do you want a beautiful voice?'

"So that I can express my happiness in the most beautiful way I know of,—by singing,' replied Mr. Toad.

"You shall have it,' declared Old Mother Nature, 'but not all the time lest you be tempted to forget your work, which, you know, is the real source of true happiness. In the spring of each year you shall go back to your home in the water, and there for a time you shall sing to your heart's content, and there shall be no sweeter voice than yours.'

"Sure enough, when the next spring came, Mr. Toad was filled with a great longing to go home. When he got there, he found that in his throat was a little music bag; and when he swelled it out, he had one of the sweetest voices in the world. And so it has been ever since with the Toad family. Old Mr. Toad is one of the sweetest singers in the Smiling Pool, but when it is time to go back to work he never grumbles, but is one of the most faithful workers in Mother Nature's garden," concluded Jerry Muskrat.

Peter sighed. "I never could work," said he. "Perhaps that is why I cannot sing."

"Very likely," replied Jerry Muskrat, quite forgetting that he cannot sing himself although he is a great worker.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton W. "How Old Mr. Toad Learned to Sing." *Mother West Wind "How" Stories*. New York: Grossett & Dunlap Publishers, 1916. 31 – 44. Electronic.