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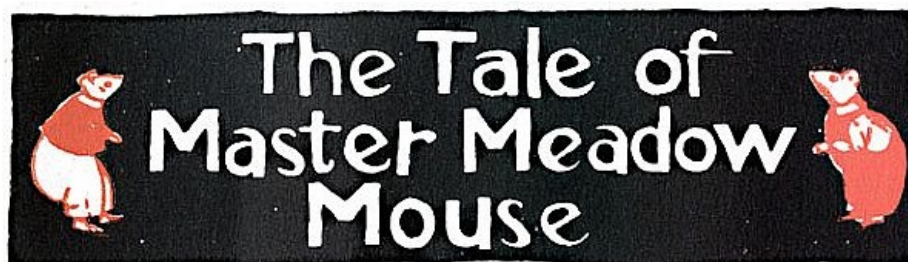
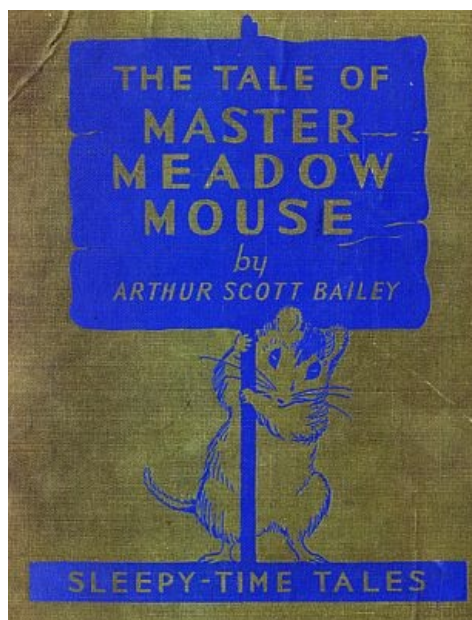
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TALE OF MASTER MEADOW MOUSE





Master Meadow Mouse gets
on the raft

The TALE of MASTER MEADOW MOUSE



By
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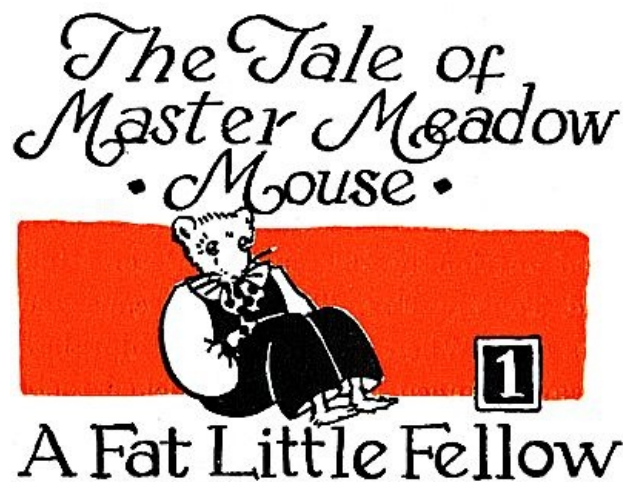
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[1]

MASTER MEADOW MOUSE was pudgy. His legs were so short and his tail was so short and his ears were so short that he looked even fatter than he really was. And goodness knows he was plump enough—especially toward fall when the corn was ripe.

He lived in Farmer Green's meadow. And he never harmed anybody. For Master Meadow Mouse was fat and good-natured.

[2]

Friendly folk, such as Paddy Muskrat and Billy Woodchuck, liked him because he was good-natured. They always smiled pleasantly when they spoke of him. And unfriendly folk, such as Peter Mink and Tommy Fox, liked him because he was fat. When they mentioned him they always grinned horribly and licked their lips.

Now, it was a pity that in Pleasant Valley, where Farmer Green's meadow lay, there were many of the fat-loving kind. Not only Peter Mink and Tommy Fox, but Grumpy Weasel, Solomon Owl, Ferdinand Frog, Henry Hawk and even Miss Kitty Cat were usually on the watch for Master Meadow Mouse. Naturally, he soon learned to be on the lookout for them. And if he hadn't seen them first he would never have grown up to be *Mister* Meadow Mouse.

[3]

In spite of all those enemies, Master Meadow Mouse managed to enjoy life in Farmer Green's meadow. Usually he found plenty of seeds to eat. He liked to swim in Broad Brook. And in winter, when the snow was deep, he made tunnels beneath it, and a nest, too, which was snug and warm under the thick white blanket that covered it.

The only time Master Meadow Mouse was ever known to lose his temper was when Farmer Green mowed the meadow. Under the high grass Master Meadow Mouse had been able to run about his well-beaten paths unseen by hawks. But with the grass cut and raked, leaving only naked stubble, he couldn't hide even from old Mr. Crow. It was no wonder that he agreed with Bobby Bobolink's wife. The Bobolink family were so upset by haying that they moved to Cedar Swamp at the very first clatter of the mowing machine. And when Master Meadow Mouse bade them good-by Mrs. Bobolink said to him, "What a shame that Farmer Green should break up a happy home like ours!" And Master Meadow Mouse remarked that it was very careless of Farmer Green. "He might have waited till the snow comes, at least, before cutting the grass," said Master Meadow Mouse.

[4]

"You'd better move to Cedar Swamp with us," Mrs. Bobolink suggested. "It's a fine place. I

know, for we lived there last fall."

But Master Meadow Mouse didn't want to move.

"The grass will grow again," he explained. "Farmer Green can't stop the grass from growing, no matter how often he cuts it." And of course that was quite true.

[5]

After haying Master Meadow Mouse had to be more careful than ever. He knew that the hawks would scan the meadow many times a day in hopes of catching a glimpse of his reddish-brown back.

Luckily he succeeded in dodging them. And he dodged a good many other fierce rascals long after winter with its snow had descended on Pleasant Valley. Yet he never complained. He said that danger kept the days—and nights too—from being dull.



[6]

WHAT is the earliest thing you can remember? Master Meadow Mouse's earliest memory was of lying in a soft nest of dried grasses. Sometimes the nest was in inky darkness; and then it was night. Sometimes a shaft of light fell upon the nest through a round hole just above his head; and then it was daytime.

That round hole went upwards—straight upwards—for about a foot. And when Master Meadow Mouse looked through it he could see, on pleasant days, a patch of brilliant blue, which was a bit of sky.

[7]

One day a desire seized him to touch that round blue spot. So when his mother was away he crawled up through the hole. But when he reached the other end of it he found, to his great surprise, that the blue disk was ever so much bigger than he had thought it, and seemed further away than it had when he gazed at it through the round tunnel.

All this was very puzzling. And he stood in the meadow near the mouth of the tunnel, peering around and wondering what this, that and the other strange thing might be. For he saw many wonderful new sights.

If his mother hadn't come home and found him out of the nest there's no telling what would have happened to him.

"Get back!" she cried, pushing him towards the mouth of the tunnel—their doorway. "It's a mercy Henry Hawk hasn't spied you."

[8]

Master Meadow Mouse hung back. He didn't want to be hurried away from the new world that he had just discovered.

"I don't see Henry Hawk," he squeaked.

Mrs. Meadow Mouse gave a sort of grunt.

"Humph! You wouldn't know him if you saw him," she retorted. "Besides, he could see you long before you could see him, for his eyes are wonderfully keen." Then she gave her son a poke that sent him into the tunnel and bouncing down upon the soft nest at the bottom of it. "You stay there until I come home again!" she called. "Do you want to go where your two brothers and your three sisters went?"

Mrs. Meadow Mouse did not wait for her son's answer. She went off again and left him to ponder over her question.

[9]

Master Meadow Mouse decided to mind his mother. Although he didn't know what had become of his squirming companions, who had already begun to crowd the nest, somehow his mother's query carried something of a threat. He wondered if the mysterious Henry Hawk had had anything to do with the vanishing of the rest of the children.

Master Meadow Mouse proved to be a hearty eater. And since he no longer had to share with others the food that his mother brought home to him, he grew fast. It wasn't long before Mrs. Meadow Mouse took him above ground with her and let him play near home.

She taught him many things—how to find ripe seeds to eat, how to keep still as a mouse and not squeak when there was danger of any kind, and how to dodge into their tunnel when there was need.

[10]

Little by little Master Meadow Mouse wandered further from his own dooryard. And he began to think that his mother was too careful. There seemed to be no need of heeding all her warnings.

Then came the day when he met the kitten from the farmhouse.



[11]

MASTER MEADOW MOUSE had rambled about the meadow without paying much heed to safety. Although he still seemed to listen politely whenever his mother gave him a lecture on dangerous birds or beasts, half the time he didn't know what she was saying. He had decided that her fears were foolish. He was sure that nothing could harm him.

He was thinking that very thought one day when he came face to face suddenly with a huge, furry creature. At least the stranger seemed terribly big in the eyes of Master Meadow Mouse, though it was only a kitten belonging to Miss Kitty Cat, who lived at Farmer Green's house.

[12]

Like Master Meadow Mouse, the kitten was exploring the meadow. To her, as to him, it was a new world.

It would be hard to say which of the two was the more surprised.

"Oh!" Master Meadow Mouse squeaked right out loud. "I—I—I wish I'd stayed at home."

"Ho!" the kitten mewed. "I'm glad I came a-hunting."

The kitten sprang at Master Meadow Mouse. But when he didn't run she stopped in her tracks and stared at him. She had expected him to flee, as the mice at the farmhouse always did whenever a body met them.

"What's the matter with you?" the kitten asked him. "Don't you know that you ought to run when I jump at you?"

[13]

Master Meadow Mouse made no reply. How could he know that the mice at the farmhouse

were ever so much sprier than he was and that they always trusted to their legs to get them out of harm's way? His family had always done differently. Unless there was a hole near-by, big enough for them but too small for a pursuer, they had ever stood their ground when attacked and fought while they could. Master Meadow Mouse knew no other way. It was something that had been handed down to him along with his short tail and his reddish-brown back.

Somehow, as she stood and gazed at Master Meadow Mouse the kitten thought he was growing bigger every moment. She began to feel uneasy about pouncing on him. It was one thing to clap a paw down on the back of somebody that was running away from her. And it was an entirely different matter to seize a person that didn't try to escape, but faced her almost boldly.

[14]

"Hunting isn't so much fun as I expected," she muttered. For a moment or two she was tempted to scamper back to the farmhouse. And then she thought how pleased her mother would be if she brought that fat fellow home in her mouth and laid him at her mother's feet—how pleased and how proud!

To help her courage the kitten began to lash her tail, jerking it from side to side as she had seen her mother move her own. And she crouched her chubby body lower in the grass.

Then the kitten jumped. And the moment she was within his reach Master Meadow Mouse gave her a smart nip on the nose with his sharp little teeth.

The kitten squalled. And she backed hastily away. "You'd better run!" she advised Master Meadow Mouse. "I shall not give you another chance!"

[15]

But he stood fast. And the kitten didn't give him another chance, either to run from her, or to bite her nose again. She fell into a sudden panic and bounded awkwardly away toward the farmhouse.

And then Master Meadow Mouse ran. He ran home as fast as he could go.



[16]

THE whole Meadow Mouse family enjoyed swimming. They liked to live near water. That was why they made their home in the low meadow, where Broad Brook ran deeper and more quietly than in the hillside pasture. And Black Creek, too, was near-by. So the Meadow Mouse family never had to travel far when they wanted a cool dip.

Almost as soon as he was able to wander about the meadow alone Master Meadow Mouse began to swim. He didn't have to be taught, any more than he had to be taught how to walk. Swimming came to him as easily as eating. And his mother never worried about his being drowned. But when he went for his first swim in Black Creek Mrs. Meadow Mouse couldn't help feeling a bit anxious.

[17]

"Look out!" she warned her son. "Look out for the Pickerel tribe! They're the most dangerous fish in the creek."

"Yes!" said Master Meadow Mouse. "I know that. I've been told about them already."

"You have!" his mother exclaimed. "Who told you?"

"A greenish gentleman with a very wide smile and queer, bulging eyes," Master Meadow Mouse replied.

"That's Ferdinand Frog!" Mrs. Meadow Mouse cried. "He's as dangerous as any Pickerel that ever swam. Where did you meet him?"

[18]

"I stood on the bank of the creek one day and saw him among the lily pads," her son explained. "We had quite a long talk together.... I forgot to mention it to you," he added.

The news made Mrs. Meadow Mouse turn slightly pale. She shuddered although the day was warm; for she feared and detested Ferdinand Frog.

"Don't ever go near that slippery villain!" she warned her son. "If you ever see him when you are swimming in the creek, make for the shore at once."

Now, Master Meadow Mouse sometimes thought that he knew more than his mother, about certain matters. And he was inclined to take her advice lightly.

"Ferdinand Frog was very pleasant when I met him," he remarked. "He cracked jokes. And he laughed at them himself."

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"Oh, he's pleasant enough," Mrs. Meadow Mouse agreed. "He'd grin and swallow you at the same time with that great mouth of his. That's what makes him so dangerous."

"Well, he's a fine swimmer, anyhow," her son declared.

"Another reason why you should avoid him!" his mother retorted.

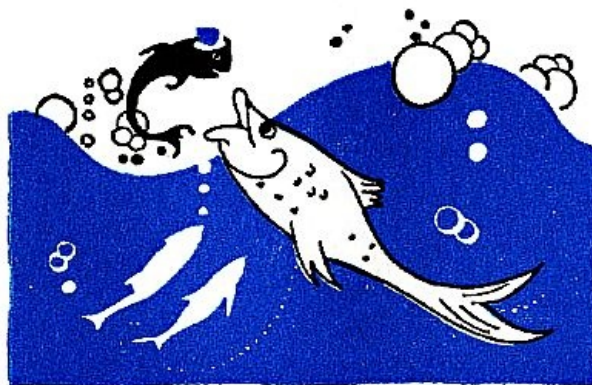
"You ought to see him dive," said Master Meadow Mouse. "He promised to teach me to dive if I'd join him in the water."

"It's a mercy you didn't," Mrs. Meadow Mouse gasped. "I'm glad you had sense enough to stay on the bank."

"Oh, I knew better than to take a swim in the creek that day," Master Meadow Mouse said. "The Pickerel family were nosing about among the pickerel weeds around the bend of the creek. I saw them myself. And Mr. Frog told me I ought to beware of them. He was very anxious—so he said—about me and the Pickerel. He said he didn't want them to catch me. He was very kind, I thought."

[20]

"Kind!" Mrs. Meadow Mouse spluttered. "He didn't want them to catch you because he hopes to catch you himself!"



[21]

MASTER MEADOW MOUSE had come to Black Creek to enjoy his first swim in its dark, sluggish water. But when he arrived on the bank he changed his mind about swimming there that day. For whom should he see but Ferdinand Frog, sitting on a rock at the edge of the creek.

For once Master Meadow Mouse was ready to take his mother's advice. She had told him to beware of Ferdinand Frog and never, never, never to enter the water when that pleasant gentleman was in it.

Ferdinand Frog proved to be as agreeable as ever. When he caught sight of Master Meadow Mouse Mr. Frog bade him a hearty good morning in a deep voice which was vastly different from the tiny squeak of the small person on the bank.

[22]

"You've come for a swim—haven't you?" said Ferdinand Frog.

Master Meadow Mouse admitted that he *had* intended to swim. But he explained that the water looked wetter than usual and he thought he'd wait till another day. "Besides," he added, "the sun has gone under a cloud and my suit wouldn't dry quickly enough."

"Come right in and have your swim!" Mr. Frog urged him. "You can change your clothes as soon as you get home."

"Oh, no—I can't," said Master Meadow Mouse.

"Why not?" Mr. Frog asked him.

"Because I haven't any more!"

"Now, that's a pity," Ferdinand Frog told him. "A handsome youngster like you ought to have a best suit to wear on special occasions."

[23]

Master Meadow Mouse looked interested.

"I'd like a nice new suit," he replied. "But where am I going to get it?"

"You've come to the right place!" Mr. Frog cried. "Maybe you didn't know that I'm a tailor. I'll make you a new suit myself!"

"That's very kind of you," said Master Meadow Mouse a bit doubtfully. "But I don't know how I could pay you."

The tailor laughed merrily.

"Don't you worry about that!" he exclaimed. "I'll get my pay somehow. And now you must come to my shop at once. I want to take your measure."

Mr. Meadow Mouse shook his head.

"No!" he told Mr. Frog. "I'm not going to your shop. I'm not going a single step nearer to you than I am now. I've taken *your* measure already, Mr. Frog. I know your game. And you can't catch me that way."

[24]

For once Ferdinand Frog forgot to laugh. He was so surprised that his mouth fell wide open as he stared at Master Meadow Mouse.

He had an enormous mouth. Master Meadow Mouse shivered slightly as he looked down Mr. Frog's throat.

The tailor closed his mouth almost immediately. For a huge pickerel came nosing among the lily pads. And spying Mr. Frog, he at once darted towards him.

Mr. Frog swam off in great haste.

"That Pickerel person," said Mr. Meadow Mouse aloud, "means to take Mr. Frog's measure if he can."

[25]



DURING his first summer in Pleasant Valley Master Meadow Mouse had often noticed old Mr. Crow flying from the woods to the cornfield. Once in a while Mr. Crow dropped down into the meadow on some business or other. But Master Meadow Mouse did not fear him. The grass was high in the meadow, screening the goings and comings of Master Meadow Mouse from prying eyes.

But after haying time the meadow was a different place. There was no cover over Master Meadow Mouse's paths. He had to be watchful all the time, because Henry Hawk had an unpleasant habit of sailing high up in the sky and dropping down like lightning when he saw anybody like Master Meadow Mouse stirring.

[26]

Old Mr. Crow continued to journey daily between the cornfield and the woods. But Master Meadow Mouse paid little heed to him. He believed Mr. Crow to be harmless, so long as he didn't catch small folk in the cornfield. The old gentleman was very touchy about corn. He flew into a rage when anybody but himself ate even one kernel.

Though Master Meadow Mouse would have liked a taste of corn as much as anybody else, he was careful to keep away from the cornfield in the daytime. He didn't wish to bring down Mr. Crow's wrath upon his small head.

"Never let Mr. Crow catch you taking any corn!" Mrs. Meadow Mouse had told her son during one of the daily lessons that she gave him. "If you must have corn, wait until after sunset. Mr. Crow goes to bed early."

[27]



Now, it happened that just before haying time Mrs. Meadow Mouse had stopped giving her son lessons. She said that she had told him everything she knew. She had told him everything at least a hundred times. And she declared that if he hadn't learned what he needed to know, he never would.

Mrs. Meadow Mouse, however, had forgotten one thing—one very important thing. There was a little trick of old Mr. Crow's that she had never mentioned to her son.

So it wasn't his fault that he was caught unawares one day, soon after Farmer Green cut the grass in the meadow.

Master Meadow Mouse was tripping homewards one day, after a little excursion. He was traveling fast, for he felt, amidst the short stubble, as if all the world were watching him. And he kept a sharp eye cocked upwards at the sky, lest Henry Hawk should surprise him. Besides, he had heard the boom of a bittern that morning. And the day before he had seen a butcher-bird skimming low over the meadow.

[28]

Those two, he knew, were every bit as dangerous as Henry Hawk.

Master Meadow Mouse ran plump into old Mr. Crow

You see, Master Meadow Mouse had learned to expect birds to descend upon him from the air. It had never occurred to him that a bird would lurk on the ground, in wait for him. So he had

a sudden fright, almost at his doorway, when he ran plump upon a big black person standing behind a knoll.

It was old Mr. Crow. And Master Meadow Mouse thought he had an odd glitter in his snapping eyes.

[29]

"I—I haven't been taking any corn," Master Meadow Mouse stammered.



[30]



OLD Mr. Crow didn't say a single word when Master Meadow Mouse met him face to face in the meadow. But a wicked glitter in Mr. Crow's eyes warned Master Meadow Mouse that there was trouble ahead for him.

If the hole leading to his home hadn't been close at hand there's no telling what would have happened to him. Anyhow, just as Mr. Crow lunged at him, with a wild flapping of his broad wings, Master Meadow Mouse slipped to one side and whisked through his doorway.

Old Mr. Crow coughed hoarsely.

[31]

"What's your hurry?" he cried. "I've been waiting around here for you for a long while. Can't you spend a few moments of your valuable time with me!"

Now, it was true that the old gentleman had been lingering in the neighborhood. The corn wasn't quite ripe enough to suit him. So he had decided to go a-mousing that morning.

His way of hunting, however, was not like that of other birds. Mr. Crow chose to do his hunting afoot. He was too wise to waste any effort looking for mice when the grass was high. But after haying he had often gone a-mousing in years past. And he had found the sport to be quite worth while. Stalking about the close cropped meadow he had surprised many distant cousins of Master Meadow Mouse who never returned home to tell the story of their meetings with the black scamp. Maybe Mr. Crow was getting slow in his old age. He had never come so near to catching a Meadow Mouse before, only to be disappointed. It was no wonder that he felt peevish.

[32]

At first Master Meadow Mouse did not answer Mr. Crow when the old gentleman called down the tunnel that led to the nest beneath the sod. But soon Master Meadow Mouse remembered that Mr. Crow could get no more than his bill inside the hole. And then Master Meadow Mouse found his voice again.

"I don't want to go above ground," he said. "Can't you talk to me, where I am?"

"It's not easy to do that," Mr. Crow grumbled. "I have to speak too loud; and my voice is hoarse to-day."

"Stick your bill into my tunnel as far as it will go," Master Meadow Mouse suggested. "Then you won't have to shout. I could hear a whisper if you'd do as I say."

[33]

Old Mr. Crow thrust his bill down the hole.

"I don't like this," he croaked. "I can't see you."

"That's because you're shutting out all the light," Master Meadow Mouse explained.

"I doubt it," said Mr. Crow angrily. "I believe you've drawn a curtain across the other end of this tunnel. And I can't talk to anybody through a curtain. I *refuse* to injure my voice trying to talk with anybody that won't give me a more friendly welcome when I call on him."

"Talk away!" Master Meadow Mouse urged his caller. "There's nothing between us to keep me from hearing you. Nothing but a foot of air!"

[34]

"Ah!" Mr. Crow cried. "I *knew* you had something in that tunnel. Remove the air at once, sir, or I'll go away and leave you."

"If his bill wasn't so hard—if it was as soft as the Kitten's nose—I'd bite it," Master Meadow Mouse thought.

And while he was thinking, all at once a shaft of light trickled inside his house. Old Mr. Crow had gone grumbling on his way.



[35]

MASTER MEADOW MOUSE felt ill at ease. Now that the grass had been cut from the meadow he began to think he didn't care to live there any longer. After his adventure with old Mr. Crow, Master Meadow Mouse scarcely dared stray from his dooryard in the daytime. Anybody, almost, could see him as he crept through the stubble.

At night he ventured further from home. And once he went even as far as the farmyard.

To his surprise he found that the grass in Farmer Green's yard was longer than he had ever seen it. Earlier in the summer, when Master Meadow Mouse visited that spot, he had been afraid to cross the lawn because it was clipped so short. But now he could creep through the thick green carpet and nobody could see him, unless a waving grass blade happened to catch somebody's eye. Everybody at the farmhouse had been too busy with haying to spend any time running a lawn mower.

[36]

Why not move to the farmyard? The thought came into Master Meadow Mouse's head. It seemed to him that the farmyard would be a fine place to live. There was grain scattered here and there, where somebody had fed the hens. There was the duck pond near-by, when he wanted a swim.

"I'll come!" Master Meadow Mouse decided. "I'll come—if I can find a good place for a nest."

[37]

Thereupon he began to look about for a site for his new home. And it wasn't long before he had found one that suited him. When he saw the woodpile he squeaked with delight.

"The very place!" he cried. "I'll begin to built my nest to-night."

So he set to work. He carried dead leaves and dried grass to the woodpile and started to make a snug home for himself in a space between the logs, well inside the heap of wood. And he had just crept from a chink and stood under the stars when a tiny voice greeted him with a cry, "What ho, stranger!"

Master Meadow Mouse looked around. And there on a stick of wood just behind him was a plump gray person. The newcomer looked the least bit like Master Meadow Mouse himself, except that his tail was ever so much longer.

[38]

"I'm Moses Mouse and I live in the farmhouse," said the gray gentleman.

"I'm Master Meadow Mouse and I'm going to live in this woodpile," said the reddish-brown chap in reply.

"That's good news," Moses Mouse remarked. "But you must look out for Miss Snooper," he added.

"Who is she?" Master Meadow Mouse asked his new friend.

"Miss Snooper—" Moses Mouse explained—"Miss Snooper is our name for Miss Kitty Cat. She lives in the farmhouse. And when she isn't indoors she's usually prowling about the yard."

To the great astonishment of Moses Mouse, the short-tailed stranger seemed in no wise startled by his news.

"Huh!" Master Meadow Mouse exclaimed. "If this Miss Snooper—as you call her—bothers me,

[39]

I'll serve her as I did one of her kittens."

"What did you do to the kitten?" Moses Mouse inquired with great interest.

"I bit her nose," said Master Meadow Mouse.

Moses Mouse gazed at him with horror.

"Don't try that on the old lady!" he cried. "If you do, you'll be sorry."



[40]



MOSES MOUSE, who lived in the farmhouse, had warned Master Meadow Mouse. He had warned him to look out for Miss Snooper's nose.

Master Meadow Mouse did not pay any great attention to his new friend's advice. He was building himself a new home in Farmer Green's woodpile. And he went about his work as if there wasn't a cat within a hundred miles.

Then, one day, he caught a glimpse of Miss Snooper. He peeped out from a chink in the woodpile and saw her sitting on a stick of wood. She was so near him that Master Meadow Mouse could have leaped upon her back in one spring.

[41]

But he didn't do that. He gazed at her with round eyes, for Miss Snooper looked very fierce, especially when she opened her mouth and showed her sharp teeth as she yawned. Master Meadow Mouse saw that she was a quite different creature from the awkward kitten whom he had bitten on the nose earlier in the summer.

"Goodness!" thought Master Meadow Mouse, staring at Miss Snooper with great awe. "Goodness! Her whiskers are longer than mine!"

And then he drew back very softly and crept to his nest in the woodpile.

That night Moses Mouse came to make another call. And he brought his wife with him, so that she might see the stranger with the short tail who was going to live in Farmer Green's woodpile.

[42]

"I saw Miss Snooper to-day," Master Meadow Mouse told them.

"Did you bite her nose?" Mrs. Mouse asked him eagerly; for her husband had told her all about the newcomer.

"No!" said Master Meadow Mouse. "No! I was too busy, building my new home, to stop and bite her."

"Isn't he brave!" whispered Mrs. Moses Mouse to her husband.

From where they sat, on the top of the woodpile, Master Meadow Mouse and his callers caught sight of a dark shape that moved stealthily towards them through the shadows.

"It's Miss Snooper herself!" Mrs. Mouse cried. And quick as a wink she dived down among the sticks of wood, with her husband following close behind her.

"Probably Master Meadow Mouse will bite Miss Snooper's nose this time," she said to Moses,

[43]

when she had reached a safe retreat.

"He isn't biting it now," Moses Mouse replied, "because he's crowding right behind me."

"Miss Snooper has come," Mrs. Mouse said to Master Meadow Mouse. "Maybe you didn't understand that it was she."

"Let her come!" Master Meadow Mouse squeaked.

"Isn't he brave!" Mrs. Moses Mouse murmured.

"I'll bite her nose if she sticks it into this crevice," Master Mouse declared.

"Isn't he brave!" she breathed into her husband's ear.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Moses Mouse in an undertone. "He *talks* a good deal about nose-biting. I should like to see him *do* it. I knew Miss Snooper was skulking around the yard to-night. That's why I came to call on this chap. I wanted to see whether he'd fight or run." [44]

Meanwhile Miss Snooper climbed all over the woodpile. She could hear faint squeaks somewhere. And she was almost frantic because she couldn't squirm under the wood and find whoever was talking.

It was almost morning before Moses Mouse and his wife dared to steal back to the farmhouse. When they left the woodpile Master Meadow Mouse left it too. He had decided, during the night, that he wouldn't live in the farmyard.

"I've become very tired of this old Cat," he told his companions—Mr. and Mrs. Moses Mouse. "I shouldn't care to stay where I had to see her often."



HUNTING played a great part in the life of Master Meadow Mouse. Somebody or other was always hunting him. And he was always hunting for something to eat. He spent a good deal of his time away from home, looking for seeds and grain. On the other hand, he spent a good deal of his time in his house; for Master Meadow Mouse liked to take naps—especially in the daytime.

After he started to live in Farmer Green's woodpile, but moved away from it before he had finished building his nest there, Master Meadow Mouse settled near the fence between the meadow and the pasture. The mowing machine hadn't cut the weeds and grass that grew close to the fence. He found shelter there from the sharp eyes of birds that would have caught him had they been able to. [46]

This time Master Meadow Mouse didn't live underground. He made a sort of little hut for himself, which kept out the cold in chilly weather, and shed the rain when it didn't pour down too hard.

It was a good home. But it had one drawback. If anybody came along when its owner was asleep in it—Well, Master Meadow Mouse didn't like to think about that. The little nest at the end of the tunnel where he had once lived had been far safer.

"I know what I'll do!" he cried at last, as a happy thought came to him. "I'll hang a sign outside my door." [47]

He set to work. And soon he had printed a sign. On one side of this was the notice, "Gone to Lunch. Back To-morrow." And on the other side were the words, "At Home. Don't Knock. Walk In."

"There!" said Master Meadow Mouse as he stood off a few paces and looked at his handiwork. "That ought to do the trick."

Then he hung the sign outside his door and went into his house to enjoy a nap. And the side of the sign that was turned outward said, "Gone to Lunch. Back To-morrow."

Master Meadow Mouse slept late into the afternoon. And towards sunset, while he was still

asleep, Tommy Fox slipped through the pasture fence.

"Hullo!" he murmured softly as his eyes fell on Master Meadow Mouse's dwelling. "Here's a bit of luck. I smell a Mouse. And he must be taking a nap inside his house."

[48]

Tommy Fox crept closer to the little hut. Then all at once he straightened up with a look of displeasure on his sharp face. He had just noticed the sign.

"He's away from home!" Tommy exclaimed. "That's a pity. He can't have been gone long. Maybe I can catch him near-by."

But he couldn't find Master Meadow Mouse anywhere. He looked all around—except inside the shelter where Master Meadow Mouse was fast asleep.

Tommy Fox came back and read the sign once more.

"Back To-morrow," he muttered. "Very well! I'll come back here to-morrow. For that's what the sign tells me to do."

[49]

And the next day he returned. He grinned from ear to ear as he read what the sign said: "At Home. Don't Knock. Walk In." Then he thrust his long, sharp nose right through Master Meadow Mouse's doorway.

There was nobody there. And Tommy Fox looked silly as anything.

"Fooled!" he growled. "Fooled by a Meadow Mouse! I hope nobody ever finds it out."



[50]

It seemed as if Master Meadow Mouse was always moving. Perhaps the pleasantest move he ever made was when he went to the cornfield to live. When autumn came Farmer Green shocked the corn. All over the field bundles of cornstalks stood in rows, like soldiers. And what suited Master Meadow Mouse especially was the ripe ears in the shocks, which Farmer Green had not yet gathered.

For some weeks past Master Meadow Mouse had been living in a rude shelter, which he had built for himself near the fence between the pasture and the meadow. Though he had been quite comfortable there during the hot weather, there were days, now, when a chilly wind swept through Pleasant Valley and made him shiver slightly as he thought of the frosts which his neighbors told him were on the way.

[51]

He had made up his mind to seek some snugger home. But not until he saw what Farmer Green was doing with the cornstalks did Master Meadow Mouse decide on his new dwelling.

"What a fine idea of Farmer Green's!" he cried, when he first looked upon the shocked corn. "I never dreamed that he had been raising corn to make homes for our family." He changed his opinion of Farmer Green. Master Meadow Mouse had been much upset when Farmer Green cut the grass in the meadow at haying time. All the birds in the air could see him whenever he crossed the bare field. Now, however, he forgot his displeasure in the joy that Farmer Green's latest move gave him.

[52]

That night Master Meadow Mouse crept into the cornfield. The round, yellow harvest moon shone down on the field, bathing the shocks of corn in a flood of light and making the pumpkins

that lay on every side look almost as golden as they appeared under the midday sun.

Master Meadow Mouse was surprised to find that many of his cousins had had the same happy thought about moving that had come to him. He met dozens of the big Meadow Mouse family that night. And every one of them was intent on picking out a shock of corn to live in.

Luckily there were shocks enough for all—and more. And no disputes arose. Some wanted to settle near the fence. Some preferred to live in the middle of the field. Many decided to make their new homes near Broad Brook, so they could enjoy a swim now and then without having to travel far to get to the water. [53]

Master Meadow Mouse was one of the best swimmers. He found a huge shock that stood near the bank of the brook. Crawling through it, he discovered at least two dozen ears of ripe corn there.

"I won't look any further," he exclaimed. "Here's food enough to last for months, all stored for me and ready to be eaten whenever I'm hungry."

Then he set to work. And high in the top of the shock he made himself a nest of dry husks, which he stripped off some of the ears.

It was an easy matter to build that home. Everything that he needed was right at hand. And it was no time at all before Master Meadow Mouse had his house in order. Then he was ready for a nap. But first he made a hearty meal of corn because—as he said—he always slept better on a full stomach. [54]

As he settled himself at last in his new quarters, just before he dozed off Master Meadow Mouse murmured happily to himself.

"I never thought," he said, "that I'd sleep in a castle in the air."



MASTER MEADOW MOUSE had always been pudgy. Before he went to the cornfield to live he had been fat enough. And after he had spent two weeks in and out of his new nest in the cornshock he was a sight to see. His sides bulged. And he had a look as if his skin weren't big enough for him.

Life had become very easy for Master Meadow Mouse. He didn't even have to leave home to get all the corn he could eat. He simply crept out of his nest, and right there in his cornshock he had two dozen ears of ripe corn. He didn't need to set foot to the ground, unless he wanted a drink. [56]

Of course Master Meadow Mouse wasn't content to stay at home morning, noon and night. He scampered away whenever he pleased. Sometimes he went for a swim in Broad Brook. Sometimes he visited his cousins, who dwelt in other shocks in the cornfield. And every night he joined the big Meadow Mouse family in a frolic. They chased one another around the pumpkins that strewed the ground, dodged behind the shocked corn, or ran along the rail fence.

During the daytime Master Meadow Mouse and his companions lay low. When they went abroad they kept a close watch for Mr. Crow. Late as it was, the old gentleman still lingered in Pleasant Valley. Although his cronies had started on their yearly journey to the South, he let it be known that he was expecting to spend the winter in the North.

[57]

"I've noticed signs," he had said, "that tell me we're going to have a mild winter."

Whenever Mr. Crow visited the cornfield, the Meadow Mouse family hastened to hide. They didn't try to go to their own homes, but plunged inside the nearest shocks of corn.

Mr. Crow was far from stupid. He knew what was going on right under his nose—or his bill. Flapping towards the cornfield from the woods he could see a great scurrying of small, reddish-brown persons. But when he settled down in the field there was never a Meadow Mouse anywhere in sight.

"They're stealing corn!" the old gentleman spluttered. "I'd stop them if I could. But what can I do when they hide the moment they see me coming?"

[58]

The old fellow pondered over the question.

"Somebody," he said, "will have to tear these shocks apart in order to catch the Meadow Mouse people. And I don't know anyone that could do it better than Fatty Coon."

Now, Mr. Crow knew where Fatty Coon lived, in a hollow tree in Cedar Swamp. And he actually started to fly over to the Swamp and ask Fatty Coon to rid the cornfield of the Meadow Mouse family.

But on the way to Cedar Swamp Mr. Crow happened to think of something. He happened to think that Fatty Coon had an enormous appetite and was very fond of corn.

Mr. Crow suddenly veered off his straight course and alighted in a tree.

"That will never do," he croaked. "Fatty would eat more than all the Meadow Mice in Pleasant Valley."

[59]

Little did Mr. Crow know that Fatty Coon was already planning to visit the cornfield as soon as it grew dark.

Nor did Master Meadow Mouse and his cousins guess that they were to have an unwelcome guest that night.

As usual, after dark they poured out of their castles in the air to enjoy their nightly frolic. And they were having what they called "high jinks" when the word went around to hide.

For somebody squeaked in a frightened voice: "Fatty Coon is crawling through the pasture fence!"



[60]

THE Meadow Mouse party, in the cornfield, vanished as if by magic. Not one of the merrymakers lingered an instant after hearing that Fatty Coon was entering the field. And since Master Meadow Mouse happened to be near the shock where he lived, he ran up it in a twinkling and crept inside it, to curl up in his nest and try to catch forty winks.

He felt safe enough. Hadn't old Mr. Crow come to the cornfield every day? *He* had never even poked into a shock to disturb Master Meadow Mouse or one of his cousins. Mr. Crow had eaten corn, to be sure. But he hadn't bothered anybody. And now Master Meadow Mouse thought that as soon as Fatty Coon had stuffed himself with corn he would stroll back to Cedar Swamp.

[61]

Master Meadow Mouse had fallen into a doze when a sharp rustle waked him.

"Ho, ho!" he chuckled. "There's Fatty Coon now! He's pulling an ear of corn off my shock. Well, I don't believe I'll miss it. There's corn enough in this field for everybody."

Master Meadow Mouse tried to go to sleep again.

"I wish Fatty Coon wouldn't make so much noise," said Master Meadow Mouse, grumbling a little because he was very drowsy and didn't like to be disturbed.

"There!" he exclaimed after a few moments. "He's gone, thank goodness!"

But Fatty Coon had only carried his ear of corn to Broad Brook, to wash it before he gobbled the kernels. He was very particular to wash almost everything he ate. But that was about the only way in which he was fussy. There was nothing, almost, that he wouldn't bolt greedily. [62]

After he had devoured the first ear of corn, Fatty Coon went back and pulled another off the same shock.

Again he roused Master Meadow Mouse from his slumbers.

"He's at it again!" Master Meadow Mouse complained. "I wish he'd go to some other shock."

The third time that Fatty Coon wrenched an ear of corn from the shock where Master Meadow Mouse lived he paused and cocked an ear towards the top of the shock.

"Was that a squeak?" he asked himself. And then he sniffed. "Ha!" he cried. "Do I smell a Meadow Mouse?" [63]

Fatty Coon was not mistaken. When he rustled the dried cornstalks the third time, Master Meadow Mouse had cried right out in his sleep. And he waked up just soon enough to hear Fatty Coon's remarks.

"Maybe you do smell a Meadow Mouse," he replied under his breath, so Fatty Coon couldn't hear him. "But it won't do you any good; for I'm not coming out of my castle until you go away."

It soon appeared that Fatty Coon did not intend to leave. For Fatty began to pull at the cornstalks with his claws. Although Farmer Green had bound the stalks together tightly, one by one Fatty tore them loose and let them fall upon the ground.

And inside the shock Master Meadow Mouse suddenly started up in alarm.



It was no wonder that Master Meadow Mouse was startled. He cowered inside his nest in the top of the shock of corn. The whole shock shook. There was a terrible rustle of dry leaves as Fatty Coon tore away stalk after stalk. [64]

"Old Mr. Crow never did this!" Master Meadow Mouse stammered. "He never disturbed my rest. But this awful Fatty Coon means to catch me. And I don't know what to do."

Meanwhile Fatty Coon was muttering horribly to himself as he worked.

"This fellow must be fat," he grunted, as he wrenched at a stubborn stalk with claws and teeth. "With all this corn to feast on he must be in fine trim. Mm! He ought to be just right to top off a good meal of corn." [65]

"My goodness!" Master Meadow Mouse gasped. "How annoying! He intends to eat me!"

For a few moments Master Meadow Mouse wondered whether he ought to fight or run. "I wish," he thought, "that I'd brought my old sign with me when I moved to this new home. If I had hung it outside my door Fatty Coon wouldn't have bothered me. When he read that notice, 'Gone to lunch. Back To-morrow,' he would have shuffled off about his business." But idle thoughts and wishes were of no use at a time like that. Master Meadow Mouse soon realized that he must act—and act quickly. [66]

"Maybe I'll bite his nose," he said to himself. "But I want to peep at him first."

So Master Meadow Mouse left his nest and crept a short distance until he could peer out from a chink between two cornstalks. In the moonlight he had a fine view of Fatty Coon. And as he stared at the intruder Meadow Mouse shuddered.

"No!" he exclaimed. "No! I never could fight him. I wouldn't dare bite his nose. He's far, far too big for me to tackle."

There was no denying that Fatty Coon looked both huge and dangerous. Across his face was a black mask which only added to his horrid appearance. And through the mask his eyes shone green and greedy right into the frightened ones of Master Meadow Mouse.

One good look was enough for Master Meadow Mouse. He drew back hurriedly. Through his mind there flashed a saying of his mother's that he had not thought of for a long time: "He that fights and runs away will live to fight another day."

[67]

"I'll run first," Master Meadow Mouse decided. "Then perhaps I shan't have to fight at all."

Then he stole out of the shock of corn, on the opposite side. And when Fatty Coon pawed his way through to the nest he found it empty.

He gave a wail of anger and dismay.

"He's gone! The Meadow Mouse has gone!" Fatty bawled. "And I'll warrant he was a fat one, too. It's always the fattest ones that get away. And nobody can deny that this one was living high."



[68]

"THIS means another move for me," said Master Meadow Mouse. Fatty Coon had broken into the house in the shock of corn where Master Meadow Mouse had been living. And Master Meadow Mouse had fled.

Somehow he felt that a change of scene would be good for him. Although he had dwelt but a short time in the cornfield, he had no longer any desire to stay there. For Fatty Coon had given him a great fright. There was no denying that.

"It seems as if I were always moving," Master Meadow Mouse mused. "It's lucky for me the world is wide. Thank goodness there's plenty of places left where I can go. I've tried the meadow, Farmer Green's woodpile, the tangle beside the pasture fence and the cornfield. And now—now let me see! I believe I'll settle along Black Creek, under the bank."

[69]

He was talking with Long Bill Wren, who had a nest in a marshy spot near the creek.

"Oh, don't make yourself a home under the bank!" Long Bill cried. "The fall rains will come soon. The creek is sure to rise. And then where will you be?"

"I'll be in the water, I suppose," Master Meadow Mouse answered.

"Correct!" said Long Bill Wren. "And you want to avoid that. Maybe you've noticed that my wife and I built our nest off the ground. We fasten it to the reeds so we'll be dry, no matter if there's a freshet in midsummer."

[70]

"Ah!" Master Meadow Mouse exclaimed with a smile. "I see you don't like water as much as I do. The fall rains won't trouble me. If the creek rises as high as my house it will be all the more fun."

Long Bill Wren gave him an odd look.

"You're a queer one," he remarked. "Anyhow, you can't say I didn't warn you. If there's a flood when the fall rains come, and you get drowned out, you can't say it's my fault."

"Certainly not!" cried Master Meadow Mouse. "And I thank you for your kind advice. But I'm not going to be drowned out. I can swim."

Long Bill Wren shook his head.

"I hope you'll escape," he said. "I shall not be here to know whether you do or not. For we're starting for the South to-morrow. But I hope to find you safe and sound next May, when I return." And then he went home, to tell his wife that Master Meadow Mouse was a very daring young fellow.

[71]

Master Meadow Mouse built himself a house under the bank of Black Creek. And later the rain fell heavily for several days and nights, just as Long Bill Wren had expected. The creek rose fast. Yet Master Meadow Mouse didn't worry. When the water lapped at his doorway he only laughed. And when it caught at his house and bore it downstream Master Meadow Mouse held his fat sides and roared.

The flood brought much rubbish with it. But Master Meadow Mouse saw nothing that took his fancy until at last a floating board caught his eye.

[72]

Master Meadow Mouse swam out to it and scrambled upon it.

"Hurrah!" he squeaked as the board carried him along with the current. "This is fine! I've got a raft. And I'll go a-traveling."



[73]

A BOARD was floating along on the swollen waters of Black Creek. On it sat Master Meadow Mouse. He was very happy. He was having his first ride, of any sort.

"This raft—" he said to himself proudly—"this raft belongs to me. I'll be a traveler. I'll see the world—at least as far as the big willow at the lower end of the meadow!"

He scarcely cared to go beyond the big willow. Beyond it lay another farm. And Master Meadow Mouse had never been off Farmer Green's place in his whole life. He feared that he might not be able to find his way back, if he ventured too far from home.

[74]

Soon he spied a friend on the bank of the creek. Master Meadow Mouse cried, "Good-by!" and waved a paw at him.

The person on the bank was one of his many cousins. And when he caught sight of Master Meadow Mouse he stared hard for a few moments. Then he shouted, "Don't jump! I'll rescue you." He was already running to the water's edge when Master Meadow Mouse stopped him.

"I don't want to be rescued," he called. "I'm seeing the world."

His cousin hurried along the bank, still watching the strange sight.

"It seems to me—" he told Master Meadow Mouse—"it seems to me that the world is seeing you. Where would you hide if Henry Hawk discovered you?"

Master Meadow Mouse did not answer. To tell the truth, the question set him to thinking. He had to admit that it might be a bit awkward to find any cover in case somebody or other made a sudden swoop at him.

[75]

"Oh, well!" he said at last. "It can't be helped. There's always *some* danger in traveling—so I've

heard."

His cousin on the bank had stopped running and now stood still and watched him anxiously until the raft had borne Master Meadow Mouse out of sight around a bend.

As the flood swung the craft toward the further side of the creek Master Meadow Mouse beheld a long-legged fisherman standing in the water. Not only did the fisherman have long legs. He had a long bill as well. And he was standing like a statue, waiting for a fish to swim past him. A fish, or a frog, or a mouse! He didn't care which.

Master Meadow Mouse knew him at once. He was Mr. Great Blue Heron—or plain "G. B." as he preferred to be called. While Master Meadow Mouse gazed at him in horror Mr. Heron swiftly thrust his spearlike bill into the water. Even his head went out of sight for a moment.

Mr. Heron did not do that in order to cool his head. Ah, no! When he pulled his bill out of the creek a pickerel came with it. And the pickerel vanished very quickly down Mr. Heron's long neck.

It was not a nice sight for Master Meadow Mouse to see, especially when he was on a pleasure trip. Besides, he noticed with dismay that his raft was bearing him straight towards the fisherman.

"If I only had some oars, or a rudder, I could steer this old raft away from him," Master Meadow Mouse thought. But he had nothing of the sort.

Master Meadow Mouse groaned.

"I wish I'd never gone a-traveling!"



[76]

Master Meadow Mouse drifted toward Mr. Heron



[77]



[78]

NEARER and nearer the board, with Master Meadow Mouse upon it, drifted around the bend of the creek toward Mr. Great Blue Heron. And at last Mr. Heron noticed it. And he noticed its passenger, too.

"Ahem!" he said softly to himself. Except for swallowing once or twice, he never made a move, but stood there in the water and waited. He waited for Master Meadow Mouse's raft to drift

closer; for it was plain to him—as to Master Meadow Mouse—that the current of Black Creek was slowly bearing the board straight down upon him. "When it gets near enough I'll just reach out and pluck that fellow off," Mr. Heron promised himself with a sort of silent chuckle. [79]

Meanwhile Master Meadow Mouse was having a very bad quarter of an hour. Slowly though his craft moved, to him it seemed to travel with lightning speed.

"I'll pass him soon," Master Meadow Mouse thought. "If I crouch down and make myself as small as possible perhaps he won't see me."

So he hugged the board tight. But the closer he came to Mr. Heron the bigger and fiercer that gentleman looked.

Suddenly Master Meadow Mouse's courage oozed out through his toes. He couldn't stay on his raft another second. Springing to his feet, he scurried to the edge of the board and slipped off it into the water. [80]

At his first move Mr. Heron moved too. He lifted his great wings and flapped them, tucking his legs under his body at the same time. A half dozen flaps carried him abreast of the floating board. And there Mr. Heron let his long legs down into the water until he stood again upon the bottom of the creek. He scanned the water eagerly, even plunging his head into it and looking all around. But he couldn't see Master Meadow Mouse anywhere.

"This is queer," he mumbled. "I knew those fellows were good swimmers. But I didn't think this one could get away from me so quickly."

Mr. Great Blue Heron waded about the creek for some time, searching everywhere—or almost everywhere. And while he was searching, the deserted raft swung off down the creek, hung for a few moments at the edge of the channel, and then drifted lazily toward shore, where it lodged at last among the reeds. [81]

The disappointed fisherman returned to his fishing. But it seemed as if his luck had turned. Not another fish came his way. And being too wise to expect that another Meadow Mouse would come traveling down the creek on a raft, Mr. Great Blue Heron at last forsook his sport and sailed away through the air towards the lake on the other side of Blue Mountain.

He hadn't been gone a great while when Master Meadow Mouse might have been seen picking his way along the bank. He was journeying upstream, on his way home.

"It was lucky for me—" he explained to his cousin, whom he met later—"it was lucky for me that I could swim under water. Otherwise I shouldn't have been able to hide beneath the board and stay there until it swung into the rushes." [82]

"You had a narrow escape," his cousin told him. "Don't say that I didn't warn you!"

That cousin was one of those persons that always exclaim, "I told you so!"



WINTER had come. The snow lay deep over Pleasant Valley. But Master Meadow Mouse didn't object to that. On the contrary, he had welcomed the snow. Even Johnnie Green, peeping out of his chamber window at the first snowfall of the season, hadn't been any happier over it than Master Meadow Mouse was. To Johnnie Green the snow meant fun. To Master Meadow Mouse it meant fun and something more.

At last he could scamper about the meadow without being seen by everybody. For he set to work at once to make tunnels beneath the snow. They ran in every direction from his house. And [84]

he was forever pushing them further and further.

Through those tunnels Master Meadow Mouse could look for seeds and grain in the stubble. And while he was rambling along his network of halls he didn't have to worry about anybody's making trouble for him, unless it was Peter Mink, perhaps, or Grumpy Weasel.

Of course Master Meadow Mouse didn't stay under the snow all the time. Now and then he liked to climb up into the open air. And he made many shafts that led to the world above.

Although most of the birds had gone South to spend the winter, there were still some that Master Meadow Mouse had to shun. Old Mr. Crow was spending the winter on the farm. And there were Solomon Owl and his cousin Simon Screecher, who hunted over the meadow nightly. And at dusk sometimes a fierce hawk known as "Rough-leg" would beat his way back and forth across the snow covered stretches in the hope of catching one of the Meadow Mouse family unawares. [85]

In spite of such unpleasant neighbors, the big Meadow Mouse family managed to have many a gay frolic under the stars on crisp winter nights. Sometimes Johnnie Green, wandering over the fields on snow-shoes by day, noticed a lacy tracery on the snow. It was the tracks of the tiny toes of Master Meadow Mouse and his dozens of cousins. At first Johnnie almost thought that he had stumbled upon the scene of a revel of fairy mice. He did not know then that the Meadow Mouse family had a village of their own right under his feet. [86]

But Solomon Owl and Simon Screecher and old Rough-leg, the hawk, knew all about the habits of the villagers. In fact they sometimes complained about the way the Meadow Mouse family had built their tunnels. They agreed that there were too many holes leading down to the village streets. It gave the Meadow Mouse people too many openings into which to dive in case of a sudden surprise when they were having a moonlight party.

"If they ever invited me to one of their affairs I wouldn't care what they did," Solomon Owl remarked one evening to his whistling cousin, Simon Screecher. "If they'd welcome me just once to one of their dances I'd be satisfied."

"It's plain that they don't like you," his cousin remarked.

"Nor you, either!" Solomon Owl boomed. And then all at once he burst forth with a peal of ghostly laughter. "*Wha, wha, whoo-ah!*" [87]

Now, Master Meadow Mouse had just crept out of one of his doorways and was looking up at the stars when that shivery sound came rolling out of the woods. When he heard it he turned quickly and hurried back where he came from.

"There won't be any fun to-night," he grumbled.



"THERE'S no sense in wasting our time here," said Solomon Owl to his small cousin, Simon Screecher. "It's a fine night. The Mice will all be out sooner or later. Let's go over and sit in that old oak on the edge of the meadow!"

Simon Screecher was more than willing. And they had no sooner settled themselves among the bare branches of the oak when Simon started to amuse himself by giving his well-known quavering whistle.

Solomon Owl stopped him quickly.

"Don't do that!" he said sharply. "Do you want to scare the Mice?" Simon Screecher cut his whistle off right in the middle of it.

[89]

"I forgot," he murmured. "But I don't believe my whistling would do any harm. I don't think there are many Mice left on Farmer Green's place. It's my opinion that they've moved away—most of them. Or maybe old Rough-leg, the Hawk, has caught more than his share. Anyhow, it's so long since I ate a Meadow Mouse that I've almost forgotten what they're like."

Solomon Owl made no reply. He was a person of few words. If anybody asked his opinion he was ready to give it. But he seldom gave any unsought advice.

"I've about made up my mind," said Simon Screecher, "that I'd move to some other neighborhood. If I knew where there was good mousing I'd move to-morrow."

[90]

While he was speaking, Solomon Owl started ever so slightly. And he cocked his head on one side, as if he were listening for something.

At that moment his cousin began to whistle again.

"Be quiet!" Solomon Owl thundered. "If I'm not mistaken I heard a squeak. But no Meadow Mouse will ever venture out of doors if you're going to whistle."

"I forgot," said Simon Screecher once more. "I'm so used to whistling that I don't know when I'm doing it."



Solomon Owl and Simon Screecher wait for Master Meadow Mouse

"That's the reason why you can't catch more Mice," Solomon Owl snapped; for he was angry. "There are dozens of Meadow Mice under the snow. But of course you can't surprise them if you tell them you're coming. You might as well send them a telegram, saying that you'll be on hand to meet them at eight P. M."

[91]

Simon Screecher was silenced for the time being.

And it wasn't long before Solomon Owl gave another start.

"There's that squeak again!" he whispered. "I believe it is getting nearer, too."

Now, Master Meadow Mouse had a tunnel that led right beneath the tree where the two cousins were sitting. And he had strolled that way after scurrying under the snow when he heard Solomon Owl laughing in the woods earlier in the evening.

It was he that Solomon heard. It was he that stuck his head out of a hole in the snow and peeped up at the star-sprinkled sky.

Solomon Owl saw him. And he dived out of the old oak straight at Master Meadow Mouse.

[92]

Master Meadow Mouse pulled his head in just in time.

"I didn't suppose that chap would be here as soon as this," he gasped. "He must have hurried over here from the woods. He must be very hungry."

As Solomon Owl returned to the old oak his cousin Simon Screecher laughed somewhat unpleasantly.

"Missed him—didn't you?" he inquired.

"Yes!"

"Why didn't you grab him out of the snow?" Simon asked. "What are your claws for? What's your beak for?"

"I couldn't dig him out," Solomon Owl replied. "The snow is three feet deep. And it has seven different crusts, one under another."

[93]

"This is a hard winter," said Simon Screecher. "I wish I'd gone South last fall. I wonder how the mousing is down there."



[94]



AS SIMON SCREECHER remarked to his cousin, Solomon Owl, it was a hard winter. The snow was deep. The days were cold. And the nights were colder. And, worst of all, food became scarce. It seemed as if there wasn't anything to eat anywhere except at the farm buildings, which Farmer Green had stuffed full of hay and grain during the summer and autumn. Many of the forest folk stole down from Blue Mountain after nightfall and visited the farmyard in the hope of getting a bite of something or other.

Even Master Meadow Mouse began to find it harder and harder to get enough seeds under the snow to satisfy his hunger. He had stored away a stock of food. But it hadn't been big enough. And that was a great mistake. Master Meadow Mouse promised himself that he would not repeat it another time. Unfortunately, all the promises in the world wouldn't give him a square meal when he needed one.

[95]

At last he went to one of his cousins who had already spent one winter in the meadow.

"This is my first winter," Master Meadow Mouse explained. "I'm running short of food. And I wish you'd tell me what to do in such a case."

"That's easy," his cousin answered. "Get more!" And then he hurried away, for he had important business to attend to.

Poor Master Meadow Mouse ran after him. It was hard to follow his cousin through the winding galleries beneath the snow. Several times Master Meadow Mouse took the wrong turn and had to retrace his steps. But at last he found his busy cousin again.

[96]

"You advised me to get more food," said Master Meadow Mouse. "But you didn't tell me where to get it."

"In the orchard!" his cousin cried. And then he hurried away again.

"I wish he'd wait a minute," Master Meadow Mouse grumbled as he tore after his cousin once more. "I don't feel like running. I haven't had a hearty meal for days."

The cousin seemed surprised when Master Meadow Mouse overtook him.

"What!" that busy gentleman exclaimed. "Have you been to the orchard and back so soon?"

[97]

"No!" said Master Meadow Mouse. "I've been chasing you. I want you to tell me what I'll find to eat when I go to the orchard."

"That's easy," his cousin replied. "Trees!" Having said those three words he dashed off again even faster than before.

"Trees!" Master Meadow Mouse echoed. "I can't eat trees. I've never eaten a tree in all my life. There must be something that my cousin forgot to explain. So I suppose I'll have to run after him again and ask him what he meant."

The fourth time that Master Meadow Mouse found his cousin he took no chances. He caught his cousin by his tail and held on firmly.

"You're not going to get away from me till I've found out what I want to know," he declared. "How can I eat a tree?" Master Meadow Mouse demanded.

[98]

"You can't!" his cousin replied, struggling desperately to free himself, for he was too busy to stop long.

"Then explain what you mean!" Master Meadow Mouse cried.

"Eat the bark!" his cousin answered.

Then—and not till then—did Master Meadow Mouse let him go.

Master Meadow Mouse chased his cousin no more, but hurried away to Farmer Green's orchard, where he gnawed a ring all the way around one of the young fruit trees, at the top of the snow. It was the first big meal he had enjoyed for weeks. And he went home feeling that the winter was not so hard as he had thought, after all.

But Farmer Green didn't agree with him. When he happened to go into the orchard one day, later, and saw tree after tree ruined, he was very, very much displeased. [99]

"I ought to have put wire netting around those young trees," he told the hired man. "This is what comes of a hard winter."



IN one way Peter Mink was like Master Meadow Mouse. He enjoyed swimming. And he spent a great deal of his time along the streams that threaded their way through Pleasant Valley. Sometimes Peter dawdled on the banks of Swift River. Sometimes he lingered for days in the neighborhood of Black Creek. Nor did he disdain so small a stream as the brook that crossed the meadow. It was deep enough for a swim. And he knew that muskrats lived under its banks. While as for meadow mice—well, Peter Mink had surprised many a one swimming in the brook. If it hadn't been for the meadow mice perhaps he wouldn't have visited the brook so often. [101]

Even in winter Master Meadow Mouse just *had* to have his cold dip now and then. So he ran one of his many snow tunnels to the brook, making a little opening that led under the ice, where the water had fallen away and left a cavern. Just because there was skating for Johnnie Green on top of the brook it mustn't be supposed that Master Meadow Mouse wasn't going to have a swim when he wanted one.

When Peter Mink wandered along a stream in winter he preferred to travel under the ice, rather than walk upon the upper side of it. It made little difference to him whether there was a dry strip along the edge of the stream, where he could steal silently along without wetting his feet. When he found no place to walk, he swam. [102]

Now, Master Meadow Mouse was well aware of this trick of Peter Mink's—this trick of lurking beneath the ice of river, creek and brook. But Master Meadow Mouse *would* have his cold dip now and then despite Peter Mink and his prowling ways.

To be sure, Master Meadow Mouse tried to be careful. Before he crept from the end of his tunnel, he stuck his head out and looked up and down and all around. He peeped under the bank of the brook. He even stared into the water. And then—if he saw nobody that was fiercer than Paddy Muskrat—only then would he venture to skip to the water's edge and plunge in.

To tell the truth, Master Meadow Mouse always felt safer when one of the Muskrat family happened to be taking a swim at the same time. For the Muskrats all had a warning signal that [103]

told everybody when there was danger. When one of them caught sight of Peter Mink he never failed—if he was in the water—to give a loud slap upon the surface with his tail.

Master Meadow Mouse always had one ear that was listening for that slap. And when it sounded he never waited an instant, but darted into his tunnel without even stopping to shake the water off his coat. He said that he could dry his coat after he reached home; while if he stopped to dry it at the edge of the brook perhaps he'd never get home at all.

You might think that now and then he would have said to himself, "Oh, I won't bother to look for Peter Mink to-day. He must be miles away. I'll step right out of my tunnel and have my swim without taking a look-see first." But Master Meadow Mouse was never so lazy as that. And the day came at last when it was well worth his while to take the little extra trouble of peeping out before he had his swim. [104]

For Master Meadow Mouse caught a glimpse of a snakelike head that darted out from under the bank of the brook and darted back again, out of sight. He knew that that queer head belonged to Peter Mink, and to nobody else.



Fishing for Mice

MASTER MEADOW MOUSE peeped out of the end of his tunnel and gave a faint squeak. As he watched, he saw Peter Mink's head, on its long neck, flash out from beneath the overhanging bank of the brook.

"What are you doing up there?" Master Meadow Mouse called.

"Fishing!" said Peter Mink promptly.

"Aren't you a long way from the water?" Master Meadow Mouse inquired.

"With a pole, one doesn't need to stand right at the water's edge," said Peter Mink.

"But you haven't a pole," Master Meadow Mouse pointed out. "At least, I can't see that you have one." [106]

Peter was greatly surprised—or seemed to be.

"I declare!" he said. "I forgot to bring my pole with me. And if you hadn't reminded me of it I shouldn't have known what was the trouble. I was wondering why I didn't get any bites." As he spoke he slid down the lower part of the bank and stretched himself like a cat. But all the time he was looking at Master Meadow Mouse out of the corner of his eye. "What are *you* doing here?" Peter Mink asked pleasantly.

"I came to take a swim," Master Meadow Mouse explained.

"Have you had it?"

"Not yet!" Master Meadow Mouse told him. "And I believe I'll wait till to-morrow." [107]

"The water's fine to-day," said Peter Mink. "I've been in and out of it forty times."

But Master Meadow Mouse wasn't to be persuaded so easily.

"I might spoil your fishing if I went in now," he remarked.

"I don't care if you do," said Peter Mink. "The pleasure of seeing you enjoy a swim would more than repay me for the loss of the biggest fish in this brook."

Now, such speeches sounded very strange, coming from the mouth of a surly rascal like Peter Mink, who was never known to do anybody a good turn. Master Meadow Mouse pondered over this last statement. There seemed to be a catch in it somewhere. And he decided, finally, that he had discovered it.

"I didn't know there were any fish in this brook worth catching," he piped. "They say there were trout here once. But now there's nothing bigger than a minnow." [108]

Peter Mink nodded. "That's the truth," he said. "If this brook has a fish that's as meaty as you are, I've never seen him."

"Ah!" cried Master Meadow Mouse. "You'd far rather catch me than catch a fish in this pool."

Peter Mink grinned at him brazenly.

"I won't deny it," he replied.

"But you tried to deceive me," Master Meadow Mouse told him. "You said—when I asked you what you were doing here—you said that you were fishing."

"So I was!" Peter Mink exclaimed with a horrid chuckle. "I was fishing for mice. And if you'd been a little less careful I'd have caught one, too."

"Good day!" said Master Meadow Mouse. "Good day and good-by!" [109]

"Don't say good-by!" Peter Mink corrected. "Say, 'Till we meet again!'"

But Master Meadow Mouse had already pulled his head out of sight and vanished inside his tunnel.



MASTER MEADOW MOUSE had a great-uncle who was known as Uncle Billy. He was the oldest of all the members of the Meadow Mouse family that lived under the snow near the brook. Hobbling along through one of the tunnels beneath the seven crusts of snow he happened to meet Master Meadow Mouse as he was returning from his talk with Peter Mink.

"I just saw Peter Mink at the brook!" Master Meadow Mouse called.

"Ha!" Uncle Billy snorted. "The question is, did he see you?"

"He did," Master Meadow Mouse answered with no little pride, for he felt quite important. "He not only saw me. He talked with me." [111]

"Ha!" Uncle Billy snorted again. "Then this is moving day."

"Why, it's not the first of May, is it?" Master Meadow Mouse cried.

"Hardly!" said Uncle Billy, with something like a sniff. "It's not Ground Hog Day yet; and that's only the second of February."

"Then why should anybody move, right in the middle of winter?" Master Meadow Mouse

wanted to know.

"Because—" Uncle Billy declared hotly—"because somebody has gone and let Peter Mink know where we're spending the winter. And it's not safe for us to stay here any longer."

Master Meadow Mouse couldn't help feeling guilty. Still, he hoped he hadn't made as great a mistake as Uncle Billy would have him believe. [112]

"I've heard," he ventured, "that Peter Mink can squeeze through any hole that's big enough for his head. But surely he couldn't get even his flat head into one of our passages."

"He can burrow in the snow!" Uncle Billy snapped. "He can and he will. He'll come sniffing and listening all around here. And when he finds a likely spot to dig, down he'll go through drifts and crusts until he reaches the stubble." Uncle Billy shook his head and drew a long breath. "Young man," he said, "you've got us into a peck of trouble. This whole village has to move. Don't let it happen again!"

By that time others of the villagers had gathered round and heard the news. Of course the news spread fast. And in a surprisingly short while the Meadow Mouse family was on its way to the mill pond. [113]

Everybody set to work—everybody except Uncle Billy Meadow Mouse. He was busy telling all the rest what to do, though he didn't help half as much as he thought he did.

But every one was polite to him, for he was the oldest Meadow Mouse on the farm.

It wasn't long before they had everything snug again. And as for Master Meadow Mouse, he was actually glad that he had made the whole village move. For Paddy Muskrat lived in the mill pond. He spent all his time there when he wasn't taking excursions up the brook. And Master Meadow Mouse found him the best of company.

Especially did Master Meadow Mouse like to hear Paddy Muskrat slap his tail upon the water, when he gave the danger signal. [114]



LIVING, as he did, near the mill pond, Master Meadow Mouse saw a great deal of Paddy Muskrat. They had a number of tastes in common. They both liked lily bulbs. They both enjoyed swimming. They both disliked Peter Mink. They were bound to become great cronies—if for no other reason than the last.

By spring Paddy Muskrat knew Master Meadow Mouse well enough to ask him a very intimate question.

"Why does everybody call you 'Master'?" he inquired one day.

Master Meadow Mouse looked at him in a puzzled fashion for a moment or two.

[116]

"I don't know," he answered. "I don't know why, unless it's because they *always have* called me that. Don't you think it's a good name?" he asked Paddy Muskrat a bit anxiously.

"Oh, yes!" Paddy assured him. "There's no doubt that it's a good enough name. But it's one that's given to a youngster—to a mere child."

"I'm not a youngster!" Master Meadow Mouse cried. "Nobody can call me *young*. I'm almost a year old!"

"I thought so," said Paddy Muskrat, as if he knew he couldn't have been mistaken. "You're grown up. And yet they still call you 'Master' Meadow Mouse. If I were you I'd get folks to change that."

It was plain that Master Meadow Mouse agreed with him in every way. He had already made up his mind that he wouldn't answer to the name of 'Master' Meadow Mouse any longer. And he told Paddy Muskrat as much.

[117]

"If they want me to answer after this, they'll have to call me something else," he declared. "Now, what would you suggest?"

Paddy Muskrat said he needed time to think the matter over. And he thought that he'd like to consult his wife, who always had an opinion.

"Wait here till I come back!" he told Master Meadow Mouse. And, diving into the water, he swam home. He was back in a few minutes, with a broad smile upon his face. "I've thought of the very thing!" he exclaimed. "Or, at least, my wife has. She says, 'Call him "Mister," of course!'"

"That's fine!" cried Master Meadow Mouse. "I'm sure I couldn't have thought of that if I'd tried all summer. And now," he added, "I must go and tell everybody about this sudden change."

[118]

So he hurried home. And, calling everybody around him, he explained that he was a year old, and that he had successfully dodged Miss Kitty Cat, Tommy Fox, Solomon Owl, Ferdinand Frog, Peter Mink, Old Mr. Crow and goodness only knew how many other dangerous folk.

"I'm grown up now," he told his hearers. "From this time on I expect everybody to call me *Mister Meadow Mouse*."

And everybody said that a new name was no more than he deserved. They all approved his choice.

No! There was just one among all the company that was opposed to the change. He snorted and started to say something disagreeable. And for once everybody told Uncle Billy (for it was he!) to be quiet.

[119]

And that was the end of Master Meadow Mouse.





Transcriber's Notes:

The only correction made is indicated by a dotted lines under the word. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TALE OF MASTER MEADOW MOUSE ***

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