

A STRANGER IN THE GREEN FOREST

Old Mother West Wind's family is quite big, quite big indeed. There are dozens and dozens of Merry Little Breezes, all children of Old Mother West Wind. Every morning she comes down from the Purple Hills and tumbles them out of a great bag on to the Green Meadows, where they blow and drift over the lands to bring happy breezes to all who live there. Every night she gathers them into the great bag and, putting it over her shoulder, takes them to their home behind the Purple Hills.

Today as Old Mother West Wind came hurrying down from the Purple Hills with her Merry Little Breezes, she discovered the newcomer in the Green Forest on the edge of the Green Meadows. Of course, the Merry Little Breezes saw him, too, and as soon as Old Mother West Wind had turned them loose on the Green Meadows they started out to spread the news.

As they hurried along the Crooked Little Path up the hill, they met Reddy Fox.

"Oh, Reddy Fox," cried the Merry Little Breezes, so excited that all talked together, "there's a stranger in the Green Forest!"

Reddy Fox sat down and grinned at the Merry Little Breezes. The grin of Reddy Fox is not pleasant. It irritates and exasperates. It made the Merry Little Breezes feel very uncomfortable.

"You don't say so," drawled Reddy Fox. "Do you mean to say that you've just discovered him? Why, your news is so old that it is stale; it is no news at all. I thought you had something really new to tell me."

The Merry Little Breezes were disappointed. Their faces fell. They had thought it would be such fun to carry the news through the Green Forest and over the Green Meadows, and now the very first one they met knew all about it.

"Who is he, Reddy Fox?" asked one of the Merry Little Breezes.

Reddy Fox pretended not to hear. "I must be going," said he, rising and stretching. "I have an engagement with Billy Mink down at the Smiling Pool."

Reddy Fox started down the Crooked Little Path while the Merry Little Breezes hurried up the Crooked Little Path to tell the news to Jimmy Skunk, who was looking for beetles for his breakfast.

Now Reddy Fox had not told the truth. He had known nothing whatever of the stranger in the Green Forest. In fact, he had been as surprised as the Merry Little Breezes could have wished, but he would not show it. And he had told another untruth, for he had no intention of going down to the Smiling Pool. No, indeed! He just waited until the Merry Little Breezes were out of sight, then he slipped into the Green Forest to look for the stranger seen by the Merry Little Breezes.

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Now Reddy Fox does nothing openly. Instead of walking through the Green Forest like a gentleman, he sneaked along under the bushes and crept from tree to tree, all the time looking for the stranger of whom the Merry Little Breezes had told him. All around through the Green Forest sneaked Reddy Fox, but nothing of the stranger could he see. It didn't occur to him to look anywhere but on the ground.

"I don't believe there is a stranger here," said Reddy to himself.

Just then he noticed some scraps of bark around the foot of a tall maple. Looking up to see where it came from he saw—what do you think? Why, the stranger who had come to the Green Forest. Reddy Fox dodged back out of sight, for he wanted to find out all he could about the stranger before the stranger saw him.

Reddy sat down behind a big stump and rubbed his eyes. He could hardly believe what he saw. There at the top of the tall maple, stripping the branches of their bark and eating it, was the stranger, sure enough. He was big, much bigger than Reddy. Could he be a relative of Happy Jack Squirrel? He didn't look a bit, not the least little bit like Happy Jack. And he moved slowly, very slowly, indeed, while Happy Jack and his cousins move quickly. Reddy decided that the stranger could not be related to Happy Jack.

The longer Reddy looked the more he was puzzled. Also, Reddy began to feel just a little bit jealous. You see all the little meadow people and forest folks are afraid of Reddy Fox, but this stranger was so big that Reddy began to feel something much like fear in his own heart.

The Merry Little Breezes had told the news to Jimmy Skunk and then hurried over the Green Meadows telling everyone they met of the stranger in the Green Forest—Billy Mink, Little Joe Otter, Johnny Chuck, Peter Rabbit, Happy Jack Squirrel, Danny Meadow Mouse, Striped Chipmunk, old Mr. Toad, Grandfather Frog, Sammy Jay, Blacky the Crow, and each as soon as he heard the news started for the Green Forest to welcome the newcomer. Even Grandfather Frog left his beloved big, green lily-pad and started for the Green Forest.

So it was that when finally the stranger decided that he had eaten enough bark for his breakfast, and climbed slowly down the tall maple, he found all the little meadow people and forest folks sitting in a big circle waiting for him. The stranger was anything but handsome, but his size filled them with respect. The nearer he got to the ground the bigger he looked. Down he came, and Reddy Fox, noting how slow and clumsy in his movements was the stranger, decided that there was nothing to fear.

If the stranger was slow and clumsy in the tree, he was clumsier still on the ground. His eyes were small and dull. His coat was rough, long and almost black. His legs were short and stout. His tail was rather short and broad. Altogether he was anything but handsome. But when the little meadow people and forest folks saw his huge front teeth they regarded him with greater respect than ever, all but Reddy Fox.

Reddy strutted out in front of him. "Who are you?" he demanded.

The stranger paid no attention to Reddy Fox.

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"What business have you in our Green Forest?" demanded Reddy, showing all his teeth.

The stranger just grunted and appeared not to see Reddy Fox. Reddy swelled himself out until every hair stood on end and he looked twice as big as he really is. He strutted back and forth in front of the stranger.

"Don't you know that I'm afraid of nothing and nobody?" snarled Reddy Fox.

The stranger refused to give him so much as a glance. He just grunted and kept right on about his business. All the little meadow people and forest folks began to giggle and then to laugh. Reddy knew that they were laughing at him and he grew very angry, for no one likes to be laughed at, least of all Reddy Fox.

"You're afraid of me!" taunted Reddy. "You're afraid. I bet you're even afraid of Danny Meadow Mouse!"

Still the stranger just grunted and paid no further attention to Reddy Fox.

Now, with all his boasting Reddy Fox had kept at a safe distance from the stranger. Happy Jack Squirrel had noticed this. "If you're so brave, why don't you drive him out, Reddy Fox?" asked Happy Jack, skipping behind a tree. "You don't dare to!"

Reddy turned and glared at Happy Jack. "I'm not afraid!" he shouted. "I'm not afraid of anything nor anybody!"

But though he spoke so bravely it was noticed that he went no nearer the stranger.

Now it happened that that morning Bowser the Hound took it into his head to take a walk in the Green Forest. Blacky the Crow, sitting on the tip-top of a big pine, was the first to see him coming. From pure love of mischief Blacky waited until Bowser was close to the circle around the stranger. Then he gave the alarm.

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"Here's Bowser the Hound! Run!" screamed Blacky the Crow. Then he laughed so that he had to hold his sides to see the fright down below. Reddy Fox forgot that he was afraid of nothing and nobody. He was the first one out of sight, running so fast that his feet seemed hardly to touch the ground. Peter Rabbit turned a back somersault and suddenly remembered that he had important business down on the Green Meadows. Johnny Chuck dodged into a convenient hole. Billy Mink ran into a hollow tree. Striped Chipmunk hid in an old stump.

Happy Jack Squirrel climbed the nearest tree. In a twinkling the stranger was alone, facing Bowser the Hound.

Bowser stopped and looked at the stranger in sheer surprise. Then the hair on the back of his neck stood on end and he growled a deep, ugly growl. Still the stranger did not run. Bowser didn't know just what to make of it. Never before had he had such an experience. Could it be that the stranger was not afraid of him? Bowser walked around the stranger, growling fiercely. As he walked the stranger turned, so as always to face him. It was perplexing and very provoking. It really seemed as if the stranger had no fear of him.

"Bow, wow, wow!" cried Bowser the Hound in his deepest voice, and sprang at the stranger.

Then something happened, so surprising that Blacky the Crow lost his balance on the top of the pine where he was watching. The instant that Bowser sprang, the stranger rolled himself into a tight round ball and out of the long hair of his coat sprang hundreds of sharp little yellowish white barbed spears. The stranger looked for all the world like a huge black and yellow chestnut burr.

Bowser the Hound was as surprised as Blacky the Crow. He stopped short and his eyes looked as if they would pop out of his head. He looked so puzzled and so funny that Happy Jack Squirrel laughed aloud.

The stranger did not move. Bowser backed away and began to circle around again, sniffing and snuffing. Once in a while he barked. Still the stranger did not move. For all the sign of life he made he might in truth have been a giant chestnut burr.

Bowser sat down and looked at him. Then he walked around to the other side and sat down. "How odd," thought Bowser. "What a very odd thing we have here."

Bowser took a step nearer. Then he took another step. Nothing happened.

Finally Bowser reached out, and with his nose gingerly touched the prickly ball. Slap! The stranger's tail had struck Bowser full in the face.

Bowser yelled with pain and rolled over and over on the ground. Sticking in his tender lips were a dozen sharp little spears, and claw and rub at them as he would, Bowser could not get them out. Every time he touched them he yelped with pain. Finally he gave it up and started for home with his tail between his legs and with every step he yelped.

When he had disappeared and his yelps had died away in the distance, the stranger unrolled, the sharp little spears disappeared in the long hair of his coat and, just as if nothing at all had happened, the stranger walked slowly over to a tall maple and began to climb it.

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And this is how Prickly Porky the Porcupine came to the Green Forest, and won the respect and admiration of all the little meadow people and forest folks, including Reddy Fox. Since that day no one has tried to meddle with Prickly Porky or his business.

The newcomer in the Green Forest was a source of great interest to the Merry Little Breezes. Ever since they had seen him turn himself into a huge prickly ball, like a giant chestnut burr, and with a slap of his tail send Bowser the Hound yelping home with his lips stuck full of little barbed spears, they had visited the Green Forest every day to watch Prickly Porky.

He was not very social. Indeed, he was not social at all, but attended strictly to his own business, which consisted chiefly of stripping bark from the trees and eating it. Never had the Merry Little Breezes seen such an appetite! Already that part of the Green Forest where he had chosen to live had many bare stark trees, killed by Prickly Porky the Porcupine. You see a tree cannot live without bark, and Prickly Porky had stripped them clean to fill his stomach.

But if Prickly Porky was not social he was not unfriendly. He seemed to enjoy having the Merry Little Breezes about, and did not in the least mind having them rumple up the long hair of his coat to feel the sharp little barbed spears underneath. Some of these were so loose that they dropped out. Peter Rabbit's curiosity led him to examine some of these among bits of bark at the foot of a tree. Peter wished that he had left them alone. One of the sharp little barbs pierced his tender skin and Peter could not get it out. He had to ask Johnny Chuck to do it for him, and it had hurt dreadfully.

After that the little meadow people and forest folks held Prickly Porky in greater respect than ever and left him quite alone, which was just what he seemed to want.

One morning the Merry Little Breezes failed to find Prickly Porky in the Green Forest. Could he have left as mysteriously as he had come? They hurried down to the Smiling Pool to tell Grandfather Frog. Bursting through the bulrushes on the edge of the Smiling Pool, they nearly upset Jerry Muskrat, who was sitting on an old log intently watching something out in the middle of the Smiling Pool. It was Prickly Porky. Some of the sharp little barbed spears were standing on end; altogether he was the strangest sight the Smiling Pool had seen for a long time.

He was swimming easily and you may be sure no one tried to bother him. Little Joe Otter and Billy Mink sat on the Big Rock and for once they had forgotten to play tricks. When Prickly Porky headed towards the Big Rock, Little Joe Otter suddenly remembered that he had business down the Laughing Brook, and Billy Mink recalled that Mother Mink had forbidden him to play at the Smiling Pool. Prickly Porky had the Smiling Pool all to himself.

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When he had swum to his heart's content he climbed out, shook himself and slowly ambled up the Lone Little Path to the Green Forest. The Merry Little Breezes watched him out of sight. Then they danced over to the big green lily-pad on which sat Grandfather Frog. The Merry Little Breezes are great favorites with Grandfather Frog. As usual they brought him some foolish green flies. Grandfather Frog's eyes twinkled as he snapped up the last foolish green fly.

"Chug-a-rum!" said Grandfather Frog, "and now I suppose you want a story." And he folded his hands across his white and yellow waistcoat.

"If you please!" shouted the Merry Little Breezes. "If you please, do tell us how it is that Prickly Porky has spears on his back!"

Grandfather settled himself comfortably. "Chug-a-rum!" said he. "Once upon a time when the world was young, Mr. Porcupine, the grandfather a thousand times removed of Prickly Porky, whom you all know, lived in the Green Forest where old King Bear ruled. Mr. Porcupine was a slow clumsy fellow, just as his grandson a thousand times removed is today. He was so slow moving, and when he tried to hurry tumbled over himself so much, that he had hard work to get enough to eat. Always someone reached the berry patch before he did. The beetles and the bugs were so spry that seldom could he catch them. Hunger was in his stomach, and little else most of the time. Mr. Porcupine grew thin and thinner and still more thin. His long, shaggy coat looked twice too big for him. Because he was so hungry he could sleep little, and night as well as day he roamed the forest, thinking of nothing but his empty stomach, and looking for something to put in it. So he learned to see by night as well as by day.

"One day he could not find a single berry and not a beetle or a bug could he catch. He was so hungry that he sat down with his back against a big black birch, and clasping both hands over his lean stomach, he cried. There Sister South Wind found him, and her heart ached for him. Softly she stole up behind him.

"'Try the bark of the black birch; it's sweet and good,' whispered Sister South Wind. Then she hurried on her way.

"Mr. Porcupine still sat with his hands clasped over his lean stomach, as he attempted to understand what Sister South Wind meant. 'Bark, bark, try bark,' said Mr. Porcupine over and over to himself. He rolled his dull little eyes up at the big black birch. 'I believe I will try it,' said Mr. Porcupine at last.

"Slowly he turned and began to gnaw the bark of the big black birch. It was tough, but it tasted good. Clumsily he began to climb, tearing off a mouthful of bark here and there as he climbed. The higher he got the tenderer and sweeter the bark became. Finally he reached the top of the tree, and there on the small branches the bark was so tender and so sweet that he ate and ate and ate until for the first time in many days Mr. Porcupine had a full stomach. That night he curled up in a hollow log and slept all the night through, dreaming of great forests of black birch and all he wanted to eat.

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"The next day he hunted for and found another black birch, and climbing to the top, he ate and ate until his stomach was full. From that time on Mr. Porcupine ceased to hunt for berries or beetles or bugs. He grew stout and stouter. He filled his shaggy coat until it was so tight it threatened to burst.

"Now while Mr. Porcupine was so thin and lean he had no enemies, but when he grew stout and then fat, Mr. Panther and Mr. Fisher and Mr. Bobcat and even old King Bear began to cast longing eyes upon him, for times were hard and they were hungry too. Mr. Porcupine began to grow afraid. By night he hid in hollow trees and by day he went abroad to eat only when he was sure that no one bigger than himself was about. And because he no longer dared to move about as before, he no longer depended upon the black birch alone, but learned to eat and to like all kinds of bark.

"One day he had made his breakfast on the bark of a honey locust. When he came down the tree he brought with him a strip of bark, and attached to it were some of the long thorns with which the honey locust seeks to protect itself. When he reached the ground whom should he find waiting for him but Mr. Panther. Mr. Panther was very lean and very hungry, for hunting had been poor and the times were hard.

"'Good morning, Mr. Porcupine,' said Mr. Panther, with a wicked grin. 'How fat you are!'

"'Good morning, Mr. Panther,' said Mr. Porcupine politely, but his long hair stood on end with fright, as he looked into Mr. Panther's cruel yellow eyes.

"'I say, how fat you are,' said Mr. Panther, licking his lips and showing all his long teeth. 'What do you find to eat these hard times?'

"'Bark, Mr. Panther, just bark,' said Mr. Porcupine, while his teeth chattered with fear. 'It really is very nice and sweet. Won't you try a piece, Mr. Panther?' Mr. Porcupine held out the strip of locust bark which he had brought down the tree for his lunch.

"Now Mr. Panther had never tried bark, but he thought to himself that if it made Mr. Porcupine so fat it must be good. He would try the piece of bark first and eat Mr. Porcupine afterward. So he reached out and snapped up the strip of bark.

"Now the locust thorns were long and they were sharp. They pierced Mr. Panther's tender lips and his tongue. They stuck in the roof of his mouth. Mr. Panther spat and yelled with pain and rage and clawed frantically at his mouth. He rolled over and over trying to get rid of the thorns. Mr. Porcupine didn't stay to watch him. For once in his life he hurried. By the time Mr. Panther was rid of the last thorn, Mr. Porcupine was nowhere to be seen. He was safely hidden inside a hollow log.

"Mr. Porcupine didn't sleep that night. He just lay and thought and thought and thought. The next morning, very early, before anyone else was awake, he started out to call on old Mother Nature.

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"Good morning, Mr. Porcupine, what brings you out so early?" asked old Mother Nature.

"Mr. Porcupine bowed very low. 'If you please, Mother Nature, I want you to help me,' said he.

"Then he told her all about his meeting with Mr. Panther and how helpless he was when he met his enemies, and he begged her to give him stout claws and a big mouth full of long teeth that he might protect himself.

"Old Mother Nature thought a few minutes. 'Mr. Porcupine,' said she, 'you have always minded your own business. You do not know how to fight. If I should give you a big mouth full of long teeth you would not know how to use them. You move too slowly. Instead, I will give you a thousand little spurs. They shall be hidden in the long hair of your coat and only when you are in danger shall you use them. Go back to the Green Forest, and the next time you meet Mr. Panther or Mr. Fisher or Mr. Bobcat or old King Bear roll yourself into a ball and the thousand little spears will protect you. Now go!'

"Mr. Porcupine thanked old Mother Nature and started back for the Green Forest. Once he stopped to smooth down his long, rough coat. Sure enough, there, under the long hair, he felt a thousand little spears. He went along happily until suddenly he met Mr. Panther.

"Mr. Panther was feeling very ugly, for his mouth was sore. He grinned wickedly when he saw Mr. Porcupine and stepped right out in front of him, all the time licking his lips. Mr. Porcupine trembled all over, but he remembered what old Mother Nature had told him. In a flash he rolled up into a tight ball. Sure enough, the thousand little spears sprang out of his long coat, and he looked like a huge chestnut burr.

"Mr. Panther was so surprised he didn't know just what to do. He reached out a paw and touched Mr. Porcupine. Mr. Porcupine was nervous. He switched his tail around and it struck Mr. Panther's paw. Mr. Panther yelled, for there were spears on Mr. Porcupine's tail and they were worse than the locust thorns. He backed away hurriedly and limped off up the Lone Little Path, growling horribly. Mr. Porcupine waited until Mr. Panther was out of sight, then he unrolled, and slowly and happily he walked back to his home in the Green Forest.

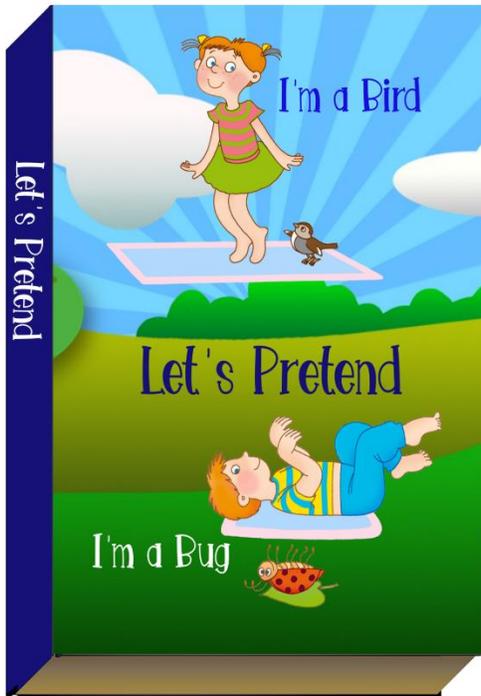
"And since that long-ago day when the world was young, the Porcupines have feared nothing and have attended strictly to their own business. And that is how they happen to have a thousand little sharp spears, which are called quills," said Grandfather Frog.

The Merry Little Breezes drew a long breath. "Thank you, Grandfather Frog, thank you ever so much!" they cried all together. "What a wonderful story. We are going back now to tell Prickly Porky that we know all about his little spears and how he happens to have them. I wonder if he knows this story?"

THE END

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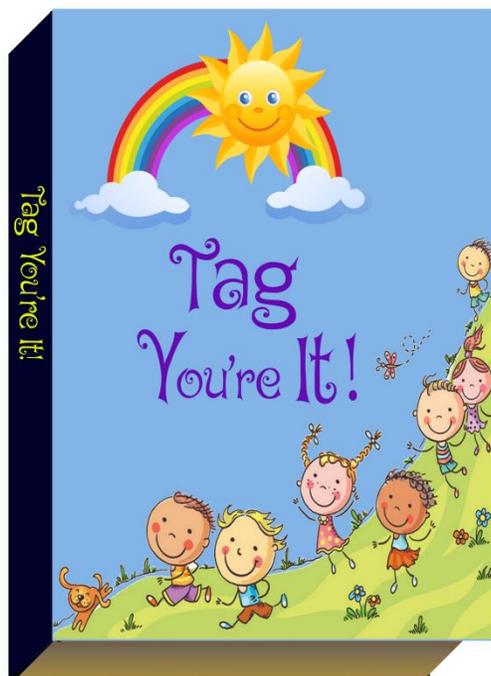


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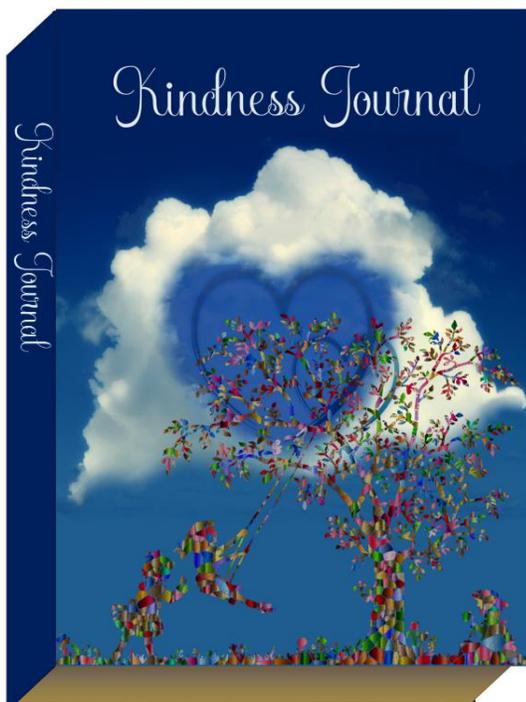
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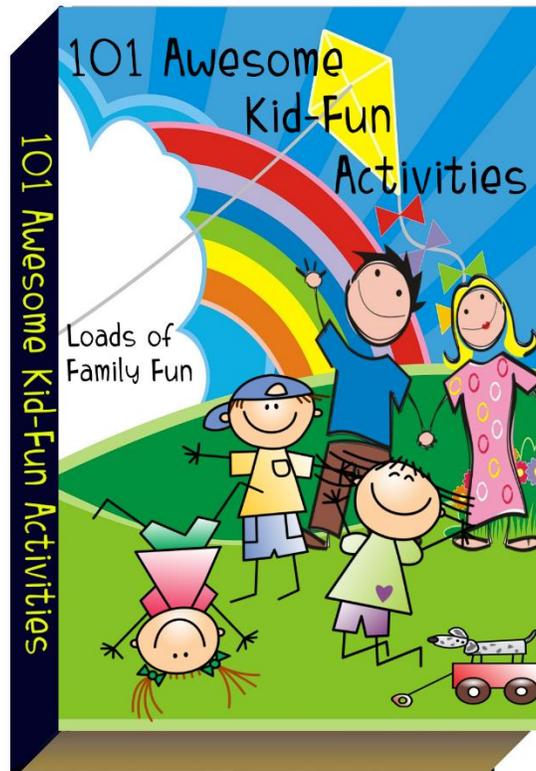
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