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The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin

Beatrix Potter · *1903 · English original, Project Gutenberg #14872*

This is a Tale about a tail—a tail that belonged to a little red squirrel named Nutkin. Each day his brother Twinkleberry and the cousins bring a polite present to Old Brown the owl, and ask leave to gather nuts on Owl Island. Nutkin brings riddles, nettles, and finally a jump onto the owl's head. He escapes with half a tail, and will not be asked a riddle again.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How long will an old owl suffer a squirrel who has no respect?

"But Nutkin was excessively impertinent in his manners."
The first morning

Six days the others bow and give mice, a mole, minnows, beetles, honey, and at last an egg. Nutkin sings, tickles, and dances. On the last day he takes a running jump right onto the head of Old Brown. The owl holds him up by the tail, intending to skin him; Nutkin pulls so hard that his tail breaks in two, and he escapes out of the attic window. To this day he will throw sticks if you ask him a riddle.

KEY CHARACTERS

Nutkin
excessively impertinent; a singer of riddles, later short of a tail

Twinkleberry
the brother who bows, and asks leave properly

Old Brown
the owl of Owl Island; silent a long time, and interested in eggs

Grades K–2

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01

A Tale about a Tail

OPENING

Red squirrels, a lake, and an owl in a hollow oak.

- This is a Tale about a tail—a tail that belonged to a little red squirrel, and his name was Nutkin.
- He had a brother called Twinkleberry, and a great many cousins; they lived in a wood at the edge of a lake.
- In the middle of the lake is an island, and amongst those trees stands a hollow oak-tree, which is the house of an owl who is called Old Brown.

02

Permission, and a Riddle

THE FIRST DAYS

The others bow; Nutkin bobbed up and down like a little red cherry.

- One autumn when the nuts were ripe, the squirrels paddled to Owl Island on little rafts, each with a sack and an oar, and with his tail spread for a sail.
- They also took an offering of three fat mice for Old Brown. Twinkleberry and the others each made a low bow and asked permission to gather nuts.
- But Nutkin was excessively impertinent in his manners. He sang an old riddle; Mr. Brown paid no attention whatever, shut his eyes, and went to sleep.

> *"But Nutkin was excessively impertinent in his manners."*
> The first morning

03

Presents without Manners

DAYS TWO TO FIVE

A mole, minnows, beetles, honey—and still the riddles.

- Next morning they brought a fine fat mole; Nutkin tickled Old Brown with a nettle. Mr. Brown carried the mole in and shut the door in Nutkin's face.
- On the third day, seven fat minnows; Nutkin brought no present at all. On the fourth, six fat beetles wrapped in dock-leaves. On the fifth, wild honey, so sweet and sticky they licked their fingers.
- Old Mr. Brown turned up his eyes in disgust at the impertinence of Nutkin. But he ate up the honey!

04

A Jump onto Old Brown

SATURDAY

A last egg, more riddles, and a whirring leap.

- On the sixth day, which was Saturday, they brought a new-laid egg in a little rush basket as a last parting present.
- Now old Mr. Brown took an interest in eggs; he opened one eye and shut it again. But still he did not speak.
- Nutkin made a whirring noise to sound like the wind, and he took a running jump right onto the head of Old Brown! Then all at once there was a flutterment and a scufflement and a loud "Squeak!"

05

The Tail Breaks in Two

THE CLOSE

Not the end, quite: an attic window, and a scold in a tree.

- The others scuttered away. When they came back, Old Brown sat on his door-step as if nothing had happened. But Nutkin was in his waistcoat pocket!
- Old Brown carried Nutkin into his house, and held him up by the tail, intending to skin him; but Nutkin pulled so very hard that his tail broke in two, and he dashed up the staircase and escaped out of the attic window.
- And to this day, if you meet Nutkin up a tree and ask him a riddle, he will throw sticks at you, and stamp his feet and scold, and shout —"Cuck-cuck-cuck-cur-r-r-cuck-k-k!"

Manners | Permission | Impertinence | Patience Worn Out | A Lost Tail

What to watch for as you read

GRADES K–2

1. The first sentence tells you what will be at stake: a tail. The ending pays that sentence exactly.
2. Each day's present and each day's riddle are a pattern. Watch the others ask leave, and watch Nutkin refuse the pattern until the owl's patience ends.
3. Old Brown is not a chatterer. He sleeps, shuts doors, eats honey, and opens one eye at an egg. The action, when it comes, is sudden.
4. The intended skinning is a real danger; Potter does not linger on it. Nutkin's later scolding is comic, and also the mark of a lesson he will not hear as a riddle again.

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