

THE NUTCRACKERS OF NUTCRACKER LODGE

Mr. and Mrs. Nutcracker were as respectable a pair of squirrels as ever wore gray brushes over their backs. They were animals of a settled and serious turn of mind, not disposed to run after vanities and novelties, but filling their station in life with prudence and sobriety. Nutcracker Lodge was a hole in a sturdy old chestnut overhanging a shady dell, and was held to be as respectably kept an establishment as there was in the whole forest. Even Miss Jenny Wren, the greatest gossip of the neighbourhood, never found anything to criticise in its arrangements; and old Parson Too-whit, a venerable owl who inhabited a branch somewhat more exalted, as became his profession, was in the habit of saving himself much trouble in his parochial exhortations by telling his parishioners in short to "look at the Nutcrackers" if they wanted to see what it was to live a virtuous life. Everything had gone on prosperously with them, and they had reared many successive families of young Nutcrackers, who went forth to assume their places in the forest of life, and to reflect credit on their bringing up,--so that naturally enough they began to have a very easy way of considering themselves models of wisdom.

But at last it came along, in the course of events, that they had a son named Featherhead, who was destined to bring them a great deal of

anxiety. Nobody knows what the reason is, but the fact was, that Master Featherhead was as different from all the former children of this worthy couple as if he had been dropped out of the moon into their nest, instead of coming into it in the general way. Young Featherhead was a squirrel of good parts and a lively disposition, but he was sulky and contrary and unreasonable, and always finding matter of complaint in everything his respectable papa and mamma did. Instead of assisting in the cares of a family,--picking up nuts and learning other lessons proper to a young squirrel,--he seemed to settle himself from his earliest years into a sort of lofty contempt for the Nutcrackers, for Nutcracker Lodge, and for all the good old ways and institutions of the domestic hole, which he declared to be stupid and unreasonable, and entirely behind the times. To be sure, he was always on hand at meal-times, and played a very lively tooth on the nuts which his mother had collected, always selecting the very best for himself; but he seasoned his nibbling with so much grumbling and discontent, and so many severe remarks, as to give the impression that he considered himself a peculiarly ill-used squirrel in having to "eat their old grub," as he very unceremoniously called it.

Papa Nutcracker, on these occasions, was often fiercely indignant, and poor little Mamma Nutcracker would shed tears, and beg her darling to be a little more reasonable; but the young gentleman seemed always to consider himself as the injured party.

Now nobody could tell why or wherefore Master Featherhead looked upon

himself as injured or aggrieved, since he was living in a good hole, with plenty to eat, and without the least care or labour of his own; but he seemed rather to value himself upon being gloomy and dissatisfied. While his parents and brothers and sisters were cheerfully racing up and down the branches, busy in their domestic toils, and laying up stores for the winter, Featherhead sat gloomily apart, declaring himself weary of existence, and feeling himself at liberty to quarrel with everybody and everything about him. Nobody understood him, he said;--he was a squirrel of a peculiar nature, and needed peculiar treatment, and nobody treated him in a way that did not grate on the finer nerves of his feelings. He had higher notions of existence than could be bounded by that old rotten hole in a hollow tree; he had thoughts that soared far above the miserable, petty details of every-day life, and he could not and would not bring down these soaring aspirations to the contemptible toil of laying up a few chestnuts or hickory-nuts for winter.

"Depend upon it, my dear," said Mrs. Nutcracker solemnly, "that fellow must be a genius."

"Fiddlestick on his genius!" said old Mr. Nutcracker; "what does he DO?"

"Oh, nothing, of course; that's one of the first marks of genius. Geniuses, you know, never can come down to common life."

"He eats enough for any two," remarked old Nutcracker, "and he never helps to gather nuts."

"My dear, ask Parson Too-whit. He has conversed with him, and quite agrees with me that he says very uncommon things for a squirrel of his age; he has such fine feelings,--so much above those of the common crowd."

"Fine feelings be hanged!" said old Nutcracker. "When a fellow eats all the nuts that his mother gives him, and then grumbles at her, I don't believe much in his fine feelings. Why don't he set himself about something? I'm going to tell my fine young gentleman that, if he doesn't behave himself, I'll tumble him out of the nest, neck and crop, and see if hunger won't do something towards bringing down his fine airs."

But then Mrs. Nutcracker fell on her husband's neck with both paws, and wept, and besought him so piteously to have patience with her darling, that old Nutcracker, who was himself a soft-hearted old squirrel, was prevailed upon to put up with the airs and graces of his young scapegrace a little longer; and secretly in his silly old heart he revolved the question whether possibly it might not be that a great genius was actually to come of his household.

The Nutcrackers belonged to the old-established race of the Grays, but they were sociable, friendly people, and kept on the best of

terms with all branches of the Nutcracker family. The Chipmunks of Chipmunk Hollow were a very lively, cheerful, sociable race, and on the very best of terms with the Nutcracker Grays. Young Tip Chipmunk, the oldest son, was in all respects a perfect contrast to Master Featherhead. He was always lively and cheerful, and so very alert in providing for the family, that old Mr. and Mrs. Chipmunk had very little care, but could sit sociably at the door of their hole and chat with neighbours, quite sure that Tip would bring everything out right for them, and have plenty laid up for winter.

Now Featherhead took it upon him, for some reason or other, to look down upon Tip Chipmunk, and on every occasion to disparage him in the social circle, as a very common kind of squirrel, with whom it would be best not to associate too freely.

"My dear," said Mrs. Nutcracker one day, when he was expressing these ideas, "it seems to me that you are too hard on poor Tip; he is a most excellent son and brother, and I wish you would be civil to him."

"Oh, I don't doubt that Tip is GOOD enough," said Featherhead carelessly; "but then he is so very common! he hasn't an idea in his skull above his nuts and his hole. He is good-natured enough, to be sure,--these very ordinary people often are good-natured,--but he wants manner; he has really no manner at all; and as to the deeper feelings, Tip hasn't the remotest idea of them. I mean always to be

civil to Tip when he comes in my way, but I think the less we see of that sort of people the better; and I hope, mother, you won't invite the Chipmunks at Christmas,--these family dinners are such a bore!"

"But, my dear, your father thinks a great deal of the Chipmunks; and it is an old family custom to have all the relatives here at Christmas."

"And an awful bore it is! Why must people of refinement and elevation be forever tied down because of some distant relationship? Now there are our cousins the High-Flyers,--if we could get them, there would be some sense in it. Young Whisk rather promised me for Christmas; but it's seldom now you can get a flying squirrel to show himself in our parts, and if we are intimate with the Chipmunks it isn't to be expected."

"Confound him for a puppy!" said old Nutcracker, when his wife repeated these sayings to him. "Featherhead is a fool. Common, forsooth! I wish good, industrious, painstaking sons like Tip Chipmunk WERE common. For my part, I find these uncommon people the most tiresome. They are not content with letting us carry the whole load, but they sit on it, and scold at us while we carry them."

But old Mr. Nutcracker, like many other good old gentlemen squirrels, found that Christmas dinners and other things were apt to go as his wife said, and his wife was apt to go as young Featherhead said; and

so, when Christmas came, the Chipmunks were not invited, for the first time in many years. The Chipmunks, however, took all pleasantly, and accepted poor old Mrs. Nutcracker's awkward apologies with the best possible grace; and young Tip looked in on Christmas morning with the compliments of the season and a few beech-nuts, which he had secured as a great dainty. The fact was, that Tip's little striped fur coat was so filled up and overflowing with cheerful good-will to all, that he never could be made to understand that any of his relations could want to cut him; and therefore Featherhead looked down on him with contempt, and said he had no tact, and couldn't see when he was not wanted.

It was wonderful to see how, by means of persisting in remarks like these, young Featherhead at last got all his family to look up to him as something uncommon. Though he added nothing to the family, and required more to be done for him than all the others put together,-- though he showed not the smallest real perseverance or ability in anything useful,--yet somehow all his brothers and sisters, and his poor foolish old mother, got into a way of regarding him as something wonderful, and delighting in his sharp sayings as if they had been the wisest things in the world.

But at last old papa declared that it was time for Featherhead to settle himself to some business in life, roundly declaring that he could not always have him as a hanger-on in the paternal hole.

"What are you going to do, my boy?" said Tip Chipmunk to him one day.

"We are driving now a thriving trade in hickory-nuts, and if you would like to join us--"

"Thank you," said Featherhead; "but I confess I have no fancy for anything so slow as the hickory trade; I never was made to grub and delve in that way."

The fact was that Featherhead had lately been forming alliances such as no reputable squirrel should even think of. He had more than once been seen going out evenings with the Rats of Rat Hollow,--a race whose reputation for honesty was more than doubtful. The fact was, further, that old Longtooth Rat, an old sharper and money-lender, had long had his eye on Featherhead as just about silly enough for their purposes,--engaging him in what he called a speculation, but which was neither more nor less than downright stealing.

Near by the chestnut-tree where Nutcracker Lodge was situated was a large barn filled with corn and grain, besides many bushels of hazelnuts, chestnuts, and walnuts. Now old Longtooth proposed to young Featherhead that he should nibble a passage into this loft, and there establish himself in the commission business, passing the nuts and corn to him as he wanted them. Old Longtooth knew what he was about in the proposal, for he had heard talk of a brisk Scotch terrier that was about to be bought to keep the rats from the grain; but you may be sure he kept his knowledge to himself, so that Featherhead was

none the wiser for it.

"The nonsense of fellows like Tip Chipmunk!" said Featherhead to his admiring brothers and sisters--"the perfectly stupid nonsense! There he goes, delving and poking, picking up a nut here and a grain there, when I step into property at once."

"But I hope, my son, you are careful to be honest in your dealings," said old Nutcracker, who was a very moral squirrel.

With that, young Featherhead threw his tail saucily over one shoulder, winked knowingly at his brothers, and said, "Certainly, sir! If honesty consists in getting what you can while it is going, I mean to be honest."

Very soon Featherhead appeared to his admiring companions in the height of prosperity. He had a splendid hole in the midst of a heap of chestnuts, and he literally seemed to be rolling in wealth; he never came home without showering lavish gifts on his mother and sisters; he wore his tail over his back with a buckish air, and patronized Tip Chipmunk with a gracious nod whenever he met him, and thought that the world was going well with him.

But one luckless day, as Featherhead was lolling in his hole, up came two boys with the friskiest, wiriest Scotch terrier you ever saw. His eyes blazed like torches, and poor Featherhead's heart died

within him as he heard the boys say, "Now we'll see if we can't catch the rascal that eats our grain."

Featherhead tried to slink out at the hole he had gnawed to come in by, but found it stopped.

"Oh, you are there, are you, mister?" said the boy. "Well, you don't get out; and now for a chase!"

And, sure enough, poor Featherhead ran distracted with terror up and down, through the bundles of hay, between barrels, and over casks, but with the barking terrier ever at his heels, and the boys running, shouting, and cheering his pursuer on. He was glad at last to escape through a crack, though he left half of his fine brush behind him; for Master Wasp the terrier made a snap at it just as he was going, and cleaned all the hair off of it, so that it was bare as a rat's tail.

Poor Featherhead limped off, bruised and beaten and bedraggled, with the boys and dog still after him; and they would have caught him, after all, if Tip Chipmunk's hole had not stood hospitably open to receive him. Tip took him in, like a good-natured fellow as he was, and took the best of care of him; but the glory of Featherhead's tail had departed for ever. He had sprained his left paw, and got a chronic rheumatism, and the fright and fatigue which he had gone through had broken up his constitution, so that he never again could

be what he had been; but, Tip gave him a situation as under-clerk in his establishment, and from that time he was a sadder and a wiser squirrel than he ever had been before.