

Elusive Peace



Rabbit emerged from the hedge which concealed the entrance to his underground mansion. Peering around him, nose twitching, ears erect, his tail still just over the doorstep, he assured himself that the immediate moment was safe. He sighed - the huge sigh of a managing director who has both production problems and population issues on his mind. He sniffed the cool Spring air, feeling the mid morning warmth lifting dewdrops from grasses one by one. His ears lowered and rose again. Always watching and listening; never free from responsibility; the safety of the family demanded it. Here at last he could relax a little in this warm, silent patch in a busy day. Busy day! And noisy day! Which was the reason for him emerging a little earlier than his usual lunch-time. *"Peace!"* He sighed again.

There was no peace down in the burrow - not even in the nursery which he once used as a retreat. The noise had risen by so many decibels this morning he had stamped his feet with such force that soil fell from the roof. Twice he had stamped and each time the ensuing silence lasted only moments before more impish ear-grabbing provoked squeals and cries from the young ones.

"Stop your noise!" he had shouted. *"Be quiet! Every stoat and weasel from miles around will hear you!"* Embarrassed by the silence which followed the echo of his own voice, he added quietly. *"I'm going out to find some peace and quiet."*

This past year productivity had been high. The burrows were bursting with baby bunnies as well as teenagers and young adults who ought to be digging their own homes by now. Sibling fun and rivalry had reached fever pitch.

"It's time some of these youngsters were finding their own homes." Rabbit had complained to his partner. *"There's too many of us here."*

"You've only yourself to blame", rejoined his mate with typical female relish. *"It **was** a long cold winter!"*

"That's nothing to do with it," he had replied. *"It's stuffy in here. The whole place is like one great nursery. It's not hygienic. There's too many bodies in the burrow. It's time some of them were gone!"*

"Now you leave them alone." Mrs. Rabbit's patience was in the thin season.

*"It's not safe for the little ones to go far yet. Far better **you** go out."*

"All I want is a bit of peace!" the burrow-master replied.

"Well. go out and find it then!"

"I will!" His voice rose again but he refrained from another stamping.

Outside, irritability drained from him. Rabbit felt that peace was very close. The more he relaxed - the lower his ears drooped - the more he sensed it. Peace! It was out here - waiting for him. The sun was strengthening. Barely a breath of air moved. The whole world was quiet. He closed his heavy eyes. *"I've found it!"* he murmured. But peace, as he was to discover is most elusive. Amid the quiet he heard crickets clapping their legs and feet among drying grasses. Rabbit groaned. *"If only they'd do it in unison!"* Next moment the sound of crickets was overtaken by a goose chorus flying high above the meadow on their way to the marshes.

Rabbit was sure he had found peace, but it must have been frightened away by the geese. He reasoned that if peace had run away from the geese it would have gone in the opposite direction to them. He left the safety of his hedge, moved cautiously through long grass, paused to nibble a few stalks of fresh green, then raced across the meadow to the river. Hidden among brambles he could hear the gentle, lullaby-lapping of water across stones. *"Peace!"* he exclaimed. *"It's here!"* He hopped closer to the river bank.

"Hello!" The vole's movements had been so in tune with the water music that Rabbit had not noticed him until a smooth fur-wet face peered up at him. *"Don't see you here very often,"* Vole shook away drops of water.

"I'm looking for peace, and I think I've found it here. It's flowing in the stream."

"Well you'd better get in and flow with it!" laughed the water vole.

"But I can't swim." Rabbit replied seriously.

"Have you ever tried?"

"No," said Rabbit. There was an irritable touch in his reply. *"But I've never seen you hopping!"*

Rat fell back into the river, laughing loudly. The sound immediately brought two mallards at full speed and full quack from the rushes and soon a whole noisy navy followed them.

Rabbit pulled his ears down with his paws. *"Quiet!"* he shouted for the second time that day. *"You've driven it away again!"*

"What? what? what?" The question was repeated over and again in a succession of quacks.

"Peace. It was here with me and the vole till your armada arrived."

"Oh, let it go! We don't want peace and quiet here all the time," the mallard commander quacked louder than the others. *"It's scary at night when it's too quiet. We like to hear a regular quack. Then we know we have friends around."*

Rabbit thought about home. It certainly wouldn't feel right in the burrow if everyone was quiet. It would certainly mean there was trouble about. But it didn't have to be quiet all the time. He wondered if they could have a *peace place* or a *peace time* each day. Time to be quiet and let peace come down underground with them.

Rabbit left the ducks - most of whom were now up-side-down with beaks at the bottom of the river and tails in the air - and hopped towards woods where he had not ventured for a long while. Once among the trees and well full with new grass, herbs and the tips of fresh dandelion he felt sure peace was about again. He sat to listen. That must be peace breathing into the new oak and ash leaves - a tender sound unlike the rough rattles of autumn. Now there was a rustling, dragging sound very near to him. Peering through the undergrowth Rabbit saw Badger pulling bedding from his set.

"I didn't expect you to be out at this time of day." Rabbit greeted him.

"There are things like Spring-cleaning can't be done at night. That's the time for feeding". replied Badger. *"What brings you here old friend?"*

"I'm trying to find peace."

"Didn't know it was lost," was Badgers typical laconic reply.

"It isn't," Rabbit began to explain without really understanding his own answer.

"It just keeps running away."

Badger laughed - a low grunting guffaw. *"My dear friend. Peace never runs away from you. More likely you run away from peace!"* A mound of well pressed bedding material appeared in the sett doorway accompanied by long sighs and loud grunts. *"Now, if you'll excuse me. I'm getting messages to tell be to get on with the job. Before I do I'll tell you when I am most at peace."*

"When's that?" asked Rabbit.

"At night. In the dark. You can claim your own space and no-one else troubles you."

With that he resumed his labours.

Rabbit was even more confused now. A shrill call close by announced the presence of a wren, busy scratching in the undergrowth. *"I heard you talking with Badger,"* he chirped, eager to share his point of view. *"I think there's only one way to get peace. You have to fight for it. We wrens can never live together for long. We like our peace - being by ourselves - doing our own thing. If anyone else in the family interferes we soon send them off."*

"That's ..." began Rabbit, but the wren lunged at a spider and was off into the wood before he could say any more. At the same time a mole's nose popped out of a mound beside him. *"Wren's right!"* The mole sneezed dirt crumbs and without an 'excuse me' his squeaky voice went on. *"We all fight for what's ours. You can't get peace if you trust everyone. Even our own families steal worms from each other!"*

Rabbit turned to ask him if he really meant he did not trust anyone, but the mole nose had disappeared under its mound again. Searching for him among last autumn's leaves, Rabbit disturbed hedgehog, half unrolled beneath them. He had been listening.

"Mole's right you know," he drawled sleepily. *"Just curl up in yourself, show your prickles to the world and forget everything else except your next meal. That's my idea of peace."* Rabbit watched as hedgehog did just that.

Now the disappointed peace-seeker turned homeward. He was not sure he wanted to go back underground yet - to leave the field where he had found peace. He paused further back along the hedge from the burrow entrance to make sure no-one would see him enter. As he hesitated, a whisper of flight like the gentlest breeze overshadowed him. Owl had perched on a hedge post. The soft caress of the air by her wings reminded Rabbit of the peace he had felt. This time it seemed to enter into him like a quiet shallow breath.

"I've h..ea..rd about your s..ea..rch," Owl whispered. "Badger is right. You won't find peace. You have to let peace find you .oo. It wants to..oo It wants to find everyone - humans too.oo! You've been looking for the wrong thing".

"What do you mean?" snapped Rabbit, frustration with his unfruitful day.

"I mean," Owl remained patient. "I mean you have been looking for quiet, and not for peace. It was quiet you found, not peace. You were close though. Quiet is like the door you open to let peace get inside you. Out here it's never really quiet. There's the rooster first thing before daylight, then the blackbirds chatter and the whole bird chorus begins and from then on its shrieking, and calling, mumbling and bumbling, clicking and whirring all the time. But peace is different. It's there even among the noise. Peace is like being satisfied after a good meal - not of young rabbit" - he added quickly - "It's like relaxing after a busy night - or day and you know it's been a good day."

"Yes," agreed Rabbit. "That's what I've been looking for, I can feel it now ... but I want it to stay."

"It will," owl told him, "if you let it inside you."

"How do I do that?"

"Practice," owl told him. "Let it get all tangled up in your fur. Let it soak in like raindrops when you brush against the tall wet grasses. Then let it get right inside - like breathing and drinking it. Then, every time you need it it will be there. It won't run away unless you open the door and let it out!"

Rabbit was not sure he understood, but suddenly he was overwhelmed by one of those magical moments when things happen without reason. A sudden gust of wind shook water droplets from the hedge above him. At first Rabbit shook them from him. Then he let them fall into his fur. As the dampness touched his skin, it happened! Peace - as he had known it by the river, seemed to soak deep into him. He inhaled, slow and long.

Rabbit hesitated for a moment, then burst out. *"I think I have it!"* he exclaimed.

"Goo ..ood" said owl. "No..ow you have to share it to make it real."

"How do I do that?"

"Let me think." Owl closed his eyes to effect his thinking pose. It only took a minute. "When you go back home don't get all steamed up about the noise. Forget that. Think about the peace inside you. Then, when the young rabbits have a break from their fun talk to them out of your peace - calmly - gently. Tell them how you feel. Perhaps suggest they could be noisy when you're out. Go out with them. Eat with them."

Rabbit scratched his left ear with his left back foot. He was not entirely convinced.

Owl could stay no longer. he rose effortlessly - silent as the secrets of the wise - powerful movements of gentleness in his wings - soft as the peace Rabbit had been seeking - unheard by his unsuspecting prey!

Late afternoon sunshine had brought the young rabbits out. "*Be careful. Keep watching out*" he warned them gently as he entered the burrow. His return was greeted by his partner's tolerant question - "*You've been a long time. Did you find it then?*"

"No!"

The lady of the burrow gave him her best '*I thought as much*' look which this time Rabbit ignored.

"*I didn't find peace. Peace found me! And I'm going to share it with you and all the family.*"

"*Oh! Are you?*" she replied. "*Well you can start in the nursery!*"

Rabbit was aware that owl had left him a serious and arduous challenge.