

THE NOT-SO-WISE OWL AND THE CASE OF THE MISSING ACORNS

Everyone knows that owls are wise. They sit on tree limbs with their big yellow and watchful eyes, quiet as though inside a library, observing all the happenings in the forest. Because they say so little in general, when they finally do speak, all the other animals listen with great interest. In fact, when animals encounter difficulties, they often seek the help of a wise old owl.

Such was the case with Hubert. Hubert lived alone inside the hollow of a bluejack oak tree. Each and every day, he perched on the elbow of a knuckly limb and stared out at the world with his enormous eyes. As long as he'd lived there, none of the other creatures had ever heard him speak a word. They thought he must be so frighteningly intelligent that he couldn't be bothered to talk, and although occasionally they had problems that needed solving, none of them were ever bold enough to ask the owl for advice. They just left him alone in his knuckly tree, thinking he was growing wiser by the day.

But the truth was, Hubert wasn't smart at all. In fact, the reason he lived alone is because when his friends moved to a bigger stand of trees in a nearby forest several years before, Hubert spent so much time trying to decide if he should take along his favorite twig that by the time he was ready to go (without the twig, because he couldn't figure out how to break it off the tree), he couldn't remember which direction the others had flown. He flew around in circles until he grew quite dizzy, when he finally landed back on his own tree he thought, *this here's a nice tree. And looky here, this twig looks just like my favorite one I left back home!* So each day he sat on his perch, watching and waiting for his friends to arrive. He thought they must have gotten lost along the way.

And meanwhile, the animals left him alone, thinking he was busy thinking deep and interesting thoughts. That is until one autumn day, when Eunice the squirrel found herself in a desperate situation.

"My acorns!" she twittered. "Where on earth are my acorns?" She ran around in figure eights around the base of the bluejack oak. She shimmied up the trunk of the tree for a better view, quite forgetting that Hubert was there. "Somebody stole my acorns," she squeaked. She was so agitated that she scurried right onto the same branch where Hubert sat, nearly knocking him over. "Oh I'm sorry!" she said. He said nothing, but looked at her with his gleaming yellow eyes. Otherwise, she'd have dashed back down the tree, but she was so upset by the loss of her winter stock that she did what no other animal ever had: she asked for his help.

"Please! Somebody's stolen my acorns!"

Hubert blinked at her. "Who," he said.

"I don't know! But they were right here beneath this tree and now there gone. I think someone's stolen them!"

“Who.”

“Exactly! That’s my problem,” Eunice twittered quickly as she flicked her tail. “Can you tell me what you saw?”

“Who.”

“Right, sorry. Can you tell me who you saw stealing my acorns? That’s my food for winter and I need to get them back.”

“Who.”

“From whoever it was who took them! I mean, maybe they’re hungry too, and I’d be happy to share, of course.”

“Who.”

“With whoever took them! Please, I know you’re busy with your thoughts, but can you help me? They were right here before.”

“Who.”

“The acorns, of course!” Eunice wrung her tiny hands together, fretting. “Goodness, where could they be? They were buried for safekeeping!”

“Who.”

Eunice thought for a moment, then flicked her tail, quick. “Well, I did, of course!”

“Who.”

“Yes, yes!” Eunice twittered. “It was ME who buried the acorns!” She clapped her tiny hands and ran back and forth along the branch. “You are a GENIUS! It was ME all along who stole the acorns! I already hid them for winter! Oh thank you, thank you for all your help,” she squeaked. “I’m sorry I nearly knocked you over, and I’m sorry I bothered you, and I thank you again for solving my problem!”

She scabbled down the tree and went right to the spot between two knobby roots where that summer she’d hidden her collection of acorns. “You really are a genius, just like everybody says,” she twittered up to Hubert.

“Who.”

“Everybody!” And she scrambled off into the forest, where she proceeded to tell all the other animals what a wise and wonderful owl Hubert was, and how they all needed to give him plenty of quiet in which to think his important thoughts.

From that point on, none of the animals bothered Hubert with any of their problems. So he had plenty of time to sit on his perch and enjoy his favorite twig and wonder what on earth was taking his friends so long to get there.