

The Dollar Watch and the Five Jack Rabbits

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Long ago, long before the waylacks lost the wonderful stripes of oat straw gold and the spots of timothy hay green in their marvelous curving tail feathers, long before they doo-doo-jangers whistled among the honeysuckle blossoms and the bitter-basters cried their last and dying wrangling cries, long before the sad happenings that came later, it was then, some years earlier than the year Fifty Fifty, that Young Leather and Red Slippers crossed the Rootabaga Country.

To begin with, they were walking across the Rootabaga Country. And they were walking because it made their feet glad to feel the dirt of the earth under their shoes and they were close to the smells of the earth. They learned the ways of birds and bugs, why birds have wings, why bugs have legs, why the gladdywhingers have spotted eggs in a basket nest in a booblow tree, and why the chizzywhizzies scrape off little fiddle songs all summer long while the summer nights last.

Early one morning they were walking across the corn belt of the Rootabaga Country singing, "Deep Down Among the Dagger Dancers." They had just had a breakfast of coffee and hot hankypank cakes covered with cow's butter. Young Leather said to Red Slippers, "What is the best secret we have come across this summer?"

"That is easy to answer," Red Slippers said with a long flish of her long black eyelashes. "The best secret we have come across is a rope of gold hanging from every star in the sky and when we want to go up we go up."

Walking on they came to a town where they met a man with a sorry face. "Why?" they asked him. And he answered, "My brother is in jail."

"What for?" they asked him again. And he answered again, "My brother put on a straw hat in the middle of the winter and went out on the streets laughing; my brother had his hair cut pompompadour and went out on the streets bareheaded in the summertime laughing; and these things were against the law. Worst of all he sneezed at the wrong time and he sneezed before the wrong persons; he sneezed when it was not wise to sneeze. So he will be hanged to-morrow morning. The gallows made of lumber and the rope made of hemp—they are waiting for him to-morrow morning. They will tie around his neck the hangman's necktie and hoist him high."

The man with a sorry face looked more sorry than ever. It made Young Leather feel reckless and it made Red Slippers feel reckless. They whispered to each other. Then Young Leather said, "Take this dollar watch. Give it to your brother. Tell him when they are leading him to the gallows he must take this dollar watch in his hand, wind it up and push on the stem winder. The rest will be easy."

So the next morning when they were leading the man to be hanged to the gallows made of lumber and the rope made of hemp, where they were going to hoist him high because he sneezed in the wrong place before the wrong people, he used his fingers winding up the watch and pushing on the stem winder. There was a snapping and a slatching like a gas engine slipping into a big pair of dragon fly wings. The dollar watch changed into a dragon fly ship. The man who was going to be hanged jumped into the dragon fly ship and flew whonging away before anybody could stop him.

Young Leather and Red Slippers were walking out of the town laughing and singing again, "Deep Down Among the Dagger Dancers." The man with a sorry face, not so sorry now any

more, came running after them. Behind the man and running after him were five long-legged spider jack-rabbits.

"These are for you," was his exclamation. And they all sat down on the stump of a booblow tree. He opened his sorry face and told the secrets of the five long-legged spider jack-rabbits to Young Leather and Red Slippers. They waved good-bye and went on up the road leading the five new jack-rabbits.

In the next town they came to was a skyscraper higher than all the other skyscrapers. A rich man dying wanted to be remembered and left in his last will and testament a command that they should build a building so high it would scrape the thunder clouds and stand higher than all other skyscrapers with his name carved in stone letters on the top of it, and an electric sign at night with his name on it, and a clock on the tower with his name on it.

"I am hungry to be remembered and have my name spoken by many people after I am dead," the rich man told his friends. "I command you, therefore, to throw the building high in the air because the higher it goes the longer I will be remembered and the longer the years men will mention my name after I am dead."

So there it was. Young Leather and Red Slippers laughed when they first saw the skyscraper, when they were far off along a country road singing their old song, "Deep Down Among the Dagger Dancers."

"We got a show and we give a performance and we want the whole town to see it," was what Young Leather and Red Slippers said to the mayor of the town when they called on him at the city hall. "We want a license and a permit to give this free show in the public square."

"What do you do?" asked the mayor.

"We jump five jack-rabbits, five long-legged spider jack-rabbits over the highest skyscraper you got in your city," they answered him.

"If it's free and you don't sell anything nor take any money away from us while it is daylight and you are giving your performance, then here is your license permit," said the mayor speaking in the manner of a politician who has studied politics.

Thousands of people came to see the show on the public square. They wished to know how it would look to see five long-legged, spider jack-rabbits jump over the highest skyscraper in the city.

Four of the jack-rabbits had stripes. The fifth had stripes—and spots. Before they started the show Young Leather and Red Slippers held the jack-rabbits one by one in their arms and petted them, rubbed the feet and rubbed the long ears and ran their fingers along the long legs of the jumpers.

"Zingo," they yelled to the first jack-rabbit. He got all ready. "And now zingo!" they yelled again. And the jack-rabbit took a run, lifted off his feet and went on and on and up and up till he went over the roof of the skyscraper and then went down and down till he lit on his feet and came running on his long legs back to the public square where he started from, back where Young Leather and Red Slippers petted him and rubbed his long ears and said, "That's the boy."

Then three jack-rabbits made the jump over the skyscraper. "Zingo," they heard and got ready. "And now zingo," they heard and all three together in a row, their long ears touching each other, they lifted off their feet and went on and on and up and up till they cleared the roof of the skyscraper. Then they came down and down till they lit on their feet and came running to the hands of Young Leather and Red Slippers to have their long legs and their long ears rubbed and petted.

Then came the turn of the fifth jack-rabbit, the beautiful one with stripes and spots. "Ah, we're sorry to see you go, Ah-h, we're sorry," they said, rubbing his long ears and feeling of his long legs.

Then Young Leather and Red Slippers kissed him on the nose, kissed the last and fifth of the five long-legged spider jack-rabbits.

"Good-by, old bunny, good-by, you're the dandiest bunny there ever was," they whispered in his long ears. And he, because he knew what they were saying and why they were saying it, he wiggled his long ears and looked long and steady at them from his deep eyes.

"Zango," they yelled. He got ready. "And now zango!" they yelled again. And the fifth jack-rabbit with his stripes and spots lifted off his feet and went on and on and up and up and when he came to the roof of the skyscraper he kept on going on and on and up and up till after a while he was gone all the way out of sight.

They waited and watched, they watched and waited. He never came back. He never was heard of again. He was gone. With the stripes on his back and the spots on his hair, he was gone. And Young Leather and Red Slippers said they were glad they had kissed him on the nose before he went away on a long trip far off, so far off he never came back.