

# The Rabbit's Foot

"COME-TO-SCHOOOOL! Come-to-schoooool!"

John woke up. Who was calling him to school? Then he heard it again.

"Cock-a-doodle-do! Cock-a-doodle-do!"

It was only Mr. Kellogg's old red rooster!

John smiled. He remembered it was only Sunday! That old rooster was wrong!

"Wake up, George! Wake up! I can smell the bacon frying!" John reached over and playfully spanked his six-year-old brother, who was sleeping beside him.

George sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

"Is today Monday?" he asked sleepily.

George was happy that school was starting. He could go for the first time this year. He would be in the first grade.

John jumped out of bed. He scowled at his brother. "How can you want to go to school? Well, I guess you're too young to know any better!" His face brightened. "Today is the Sabbath, George. You can go to meeting."

"No! I want to go to real school!" George sounded cross. He looked as if he might cry. That would never do on Sunday morning. Mother would be upset. On the Sabbath everyone was supposed to be quiet and thoughtful and especially kind to everyone else.

"I'll take you to school tomorrow, George," John promised. "Look! I'm almost dressed! If you hurry, I'll wait and tie your shoes."

George tumbled out of bed, grabbed his clothes, and started to dress. The night before their mother had neatly laid out on two chairs

the boys' white shirts, black stockings, and good pants. The boys went downstairs to the kitchen where their mother was working.

"Good morning, boys," she greeted them when they took their places at the large round kitchen table. Sarah Deere, a tall, pretty woman, with light brown hair combed back into a smooth roll, looked as neat as a pin in her blue Sunday dress and crisp white apron.

Soon Betsey and the two older boys, Francis, 14, and William, 12, came to breakfast. When the children were seated, Mrs. Deere took her place between George and John.

All of them folded their hands and bowed their heads. It was Betsey's turn to say the blessing.

For our daily bread, *O* Lord,  
Make us truly thankful.  
For all the blessings Thou hast sent  
We are truly grateful. Amen.

Even before Betsey said "Amen," George's brown curly head popped up. "You didn't close your eyes, William!" he shouted gleefully. "Your eyes were open the whole time while Betsey was saying the blessing!"

"Now, how could you tell that, George, if your eyes were shut?" asked William.

"Well—— „ George hesitated. "Well, anyway I had only one eye open!"

All the children laughed. Mrs. Deere smiled at her youngest. Then she said seriously, "We must always close our eyes when we pray, boys. That makes it easier to think about our blessings. George, you musn't talk so loudly. It isn't polite. Besides, it's the Sabbath, you know."

George nodded his head. "I like Betsey's blessing better than yours, William," he whispered loudly. "Yours is too long!"

The children all wanted to please their mother. They knew how hard she worked

making dresses and capes and coats for other people. They knew how much she missed their father, too. It was only a little more than a year ago that their father had died. His name had been William, too.

He had been a tailor. The front part of their house had been his tailoring shop. There he had made fine woolen suits and coats. Last year he had sailed on the Atlantic Ocean to England to buy woolen cloth, but he had not come back. He had died during the trip.

Mrs. Deere now worked alone in the tailoring shop. The children helped all they could. Francis cut the heavy woolen cloth where his mother had marked it. William often delivered a fine new coat or cape to its owner. Betsey swept the floor of the shop, trimmed the large candles or sewing dips, and kept the work tables neat and orderly. John was always glad to do errands for his mother. She often sent

him to the store to buy thread or buttons or hooks. Even little George helped. He wound yarn into balls and filled the scrap box with left-over pieces of cloth.

When all of them were ready for church, Mrs. Deere smiled her approval. "My, how fine my children look!" she said.

The boys, their hair neatly combed, stood very straight. Their coats had been brushed and pressed, and their shoes had been cleaned and shined. Betsey's long white dress didn't have a single wrinkle. Her curls were brushed into long rolls, and her bonnet was tied beneath her chin with a blue ribbon.

"I wish we had a carriage and a horse *so* we could ride to church," Betsey said.

"Why, Betsey Deere! What a lazy thing to say!" scolded William. "You ought to be glad the Meeting House is so close! We can walk quicker than we could harness a horse!"

"I'm going to have a team of six black horses when I grow up!" George announced.

"Now, children, that's enough," Mrs. Deere said firmly, but kindly. "Come, Betsey, you walk with me. Then John and William. Francis, you'd better take hold of George's hand. George, today I don't want Mr. Mills to have to tickle you even once!"

Mr. Mills was the tithingman. He stood in the back of the Meeting House with his long stick or wand. On the end of the wand was a rabbit's foot. If any child fell asleep, whispered, or even wiggled too much, Mr. Mills came down the aisle and ticked him. A child who had to be tickled was disgraced.

The Deere family walked over the bridge and up Main Street. They passed Merchants' Row, where all the stores were tightly closed. They went along Park Court Square, where farmers, who brought their families to church

in wagons and carriages, had tied their horses to the hitching posts.

The big white Meeting House with its tall steeple, was just across from the park. The Deere family followed Francis up the steps and into the church. Mr. Mills was standing just inside with his wand.

"I do hope George will sit still and not whisper today!" John said to himself. He followed Betsey, his mother, and George into their pew. William sat beside John, and Francis sat next to the aisle of the cool, quiet church. Sunshine streamed through the open windows and made leafy patterns on the polished dark wood of the pews.

When Seth came in with his family, he turned and grinned at John. After a quick nod, John didn't look at Seth again. The boys might begin to laugh if they continued to look at each other for very long.

John watched Pastor Merrill. The pastor, in his long black coat, went up the stairs into the high wooden pulpit at the front of the church. When he raised his arms, everyone stood up. Then he began to pray. John closed his eyes and tried to listen. Soon, however, he began to think about the blacksmith shop.

After the long prayer, the congregation sang a hymn. John loved to sing. He liked the singing better than any other part of the church service.

George liked the singing, too. He didn't have to be quiet then. He could tap his feet and drum his fingers on the wood. He watched his brother and tried to sing the same words his brother sang.

Come we that love the Lord,  
And let our joys be known;  
Join in a song with sweet accord,  
And thus surround His throne.

"—His throne!" George finished loudly, after everyone else had stopped singing.

Mrs. Deere looked down at him and frowned. Francis, glancing down at his small brother, shook his head. Betsey and William stared straight ahead. John flushed and looked down at his shoes. He wished he weren't sitting next to George.

Then Pastor Merrill began to preach, and John tried to listen to the sermon. Pastor Merrill used such big words! John looked out the window and saw a bluejay flash through the branches of an elm tree.

Then John noticed that his mother seemed upset. First she looked at George, then at the floor, then at George again.

John saw that his little brother was quietly playing the church game with his fingers. First George locked his fingers. Then he made a steeple with his first two fingers and the church

doors with his thumbs. Then he opened his thumbs and quickly turned his hands over so all the fingers pointed up,

John could remember when he used to do the same thing. He knew that George was saying to himself,

Here's the church  
And here's the steeple.  
Open the door  
And see all the people!

John looked at his mother again. Her eyes were open very wide. Again she glanced, first at George, then at the floor under his feet, then back at John.

At first John didn't see anything when he looked at the floor. Then he looked more intently, and his eyes got bigger too!

There, close to George's feet, was a little brown tree toad! John knew the toad would jump before long!

John saw that his mother's eyes looked softer now. She glanced again at George. Then she gave John a tiny nod which he understood.

George loved frogs and toads. If he saw this one, he'd surely forget he was in church. He'd probably yell right out loud!

Mother wanted John to get rid of the toad before George saw it. How could he do it without his little brother noticing? For a minute John sat very still and thought. Then he reached into his coat pocket and got out his white Sunday handkerchief.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mr. Mills moving slowly down their side of the church. John looked down at George. The boy was starting to lock his fingers again. John knew he had to try. He took a deep breath and put his handkerchief over his mouth.

**"Ka-chew!"** He pretended to sneeze. As he did so he bent over as far as he could. When

he straightened up, he had scooped the little toad into his handkerchief.

People turned their heads to look at him. John felt his neck getting hot. Quickly he put the handkerchief into his pocket.

Thump! Tickle! Tickle! Mr. Mills was rubbing the rabbit's foot over John's cheek.



John stared straight ahead. He felt as if his face was burning up! He wanted to get up and run out of the Meeting House!

He was the first one home from church. He hadn't even waited to talk with Seth. When the rest of the family came in, George began to chant, "John got the rabbit's foot! John got the rabbit's foot!"

Mrs. Deere grabbed her youngest son. She knelt in front of him. "George Deere! You stop that teasing this minute!"

"Why, Mother? John was bad! He sneezed too hard. I was good. Mr. Mills told me I behaved very well."

"John was not bad. John was good. That was a necessary sneeze!" Mrs. Deere looked at John over George's head. There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. Betsey, Francis, and William looked puzzled.

Their mother stood up, walked over to John,

and put her arm around his shoulders. "I'm proud of John," she told them all. "He did a fine thing today, and he did it for you, George! Show them why you sneezed: son."

John took out his handkerchief, unfolded it, and showed them the toad.

"A toad! A little old tree toad!" George yelled delightedly.

"Yes!" Mrs. Deere laughed. "That's just how you would have sounded in church, George, if John hadn't sneezed and caught the toad."

George stroked the little animal with one finger. "How can you catch a toad by sneezing?" he wanted to know.

"It's a trick!" John told his brother. He could laugh now, too. The rabbit's foot didn't matter any more. His mother was proud of him, and that was all that really mattered.