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Playing Explorers and Lions

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One Saturday afternoon Snug and Monkey-Pug decided to go off by themselves and play explorers hunting big game.

There wasn't a real lion within a thousand miles of Monkey-town. But that didn't matter. These young monkeys knew just what kind of game they were after, and it was every bit as easy to imagine the woods full of lions as it was to pretend to be explorers. It made the sport much more exciting.

Armed with wooden guns, they marched off to the pasture fields, where they found plenty of game waiting in the hedgerows and underbrush.

"There goes a lion! Head him off, Snug!" shouted Pug, as a nimble creature about half the size of a grown monkey bounded over the stone wall and perched on a hummock in plain sight.

This "lion" had ears longer than his front legs, hind legs nearly as long as his body, and a tail so short it looked as if it had been cut off twice before it began to grow.

When Snug and Pug weren't playing explorers, they called this sort of creature by his real name: Jack-Rabbit. Jack-Rabbit didn't mind what the hunters with the wooden guns called him, as long as he could outrun the fastest monkey ever born.

He wasn't afraid of wooden guns, either, unless the hunters got close enough to use them as clubs. And he liked a bit of fun himself, when the weather was fine and the young monkeys weren't too thick on the ground.

When the hunters had climbed the wall and were just about to surround their game, Jack-Rabbit cocked up his ears, winked, and called out merrily: "You're It! Catch me if you can!" Then he loped away at an easy pace for a quarter of a mile.

He did this several times, each time the hunters came close, until he'd led them in a big circle back to where they started. Then he sat up on a hummock and began wagging his ears criss-cross, while the panting hunters flopped onto the grass to rest. And he sang them a little song about short legs and long ears:



"*Oh, little boy-monkeys, your legs are too short, Your tails are too long for your ears; You'd better look out, or you'll get caught With my wagglety-wagglety shears!*

"*Oh, little boy-monkeys, why turn you so pale At my wagglety-wagglety ears? I can piece out your legs with a piece of your tail With my wagglety-wagglety shears!*"

That was more than the explorers could stand. Snug said he wished they'd brought his father's shotgun, because the sight of it would frighten that saucy rabbit half to death, even if it wasn't loaded.

Pug said he knew where the gun rack was in the stable. After a moment's hesitation, Snug said, "All right. You go get it, and I'll stay here and keep this rabbit busy until you're back."

Snug began teasing Jack-Rabbit, asking whether he could spell "carrot" backwards and other silly questions meant to hurt his feelings, which is a monkey's way of trying to be funny. He kept at it until Monkey-Pug came creeping back with the gun.

Of course they thought it "wasn't loaded," like many other monkeys, some of whom lived only long enough to find out how easy it is to be wrong about that.

Jack-Rabbit decided it would be safer to move a little farther off. Pug started to run and head him off, so the rabbit could be frightened half to death by the sight of the gun. As he ran, he shouted to Snug: "Ready! Take aim! *Fire!*"

Snug dropped to his knees and put the gun to his shoulder to go through the motions. To make it feel more real, he cocked it and pulled the trigger, and to his horror the gun went off with a *bang!*, followed by a wild monkey shriek.

When Snug picked himself up from the kick of the gun, Jack-Rabbit had vanished, and Monkey-Pug was dancing on one foot, howling and shouting between breaths, "Oh, I'm killed! I'm killed!"

Snug ran to him and was relieved to see that only a few bits of bird-shot had hit Pug's leg. Most of the charge had torn up the turf nearby. But Pug wasn't easily

convinced that his wounds were slight. He begged Snug to help him to the doctor's office, and declared as he limped off, leaning on Snug, that he knew he'd die before he got there, and that they'd cut off his leg besides.

On the way, Snug remembered that he'd left the gun behind, and ran back to get it.

When he was a few yards from the spot, there sat Jack-Rabbit, holding the gun, and calling out threateningly: "Now it's *my* turn. Come one step closer and I'll fire!"

Two thoughts flashed through Snug's head. The first was that the gun had only one barrel, and he now knew for certain it "wasn't loaded." The second was that Jack-Rabbits don't wear cartridge belts.

"Fire away! Who's afraid?" he shouted back, and sprang at Jack-Rabbit, who turned and ran as soon as he saw his bluff had failed.

The gun was heavy. Snug quickly grabbed the butt and wrenched it away, while Jack skipped over the wall. Snug shouted after him:

"*You'd better look out for your wagglety ears, Or I'll clip 'em as short as your tail; For I know where there's a pair of big shears That'll make a Jack-rabbit turn pale!*"

Then Snug rejoined his wounded friend, and together they went to the doctor's office. The monkey-surgeon found three or four little round bits of lead just under the skin, easily removed with tweezers, and patched the spots with plaster.

When he heard how it had happened, and that they "didn't know the gun was loaded," he said sternly:

"You're lucky to get off so easily. The next time either of you fools with a gun that isn't yours, you may be lucky enough to hit a stone wall, or you may get more shot in the wrong place. Now go along."

That sounded cruel and unkind. But the gruff old surgeon was getting tired of patching up young monkeys and old ones, on the Fourth of July and between times, whose only excuse for getting hurt or hurting others was that they "didn't know it was loaded."

When Snug got home and had put the gun back in the rack, he met his mother, who immediately started telling him what had happened while he was gone.

A fierce hen-hawk had snatched one of their best pullets and carried her to the top of a tall tree across the road, and eaten her in plain sight, because someone had borrowed or stolen Father's gun from the stable.

Snug quickly explained that he'd taken the gun but had put it back safely.

"Run and tell your father at once," said his mother. "He's out in the orchard with a club, watching the chickens in case the hawk comes back."

Snug ran and told him. Away rushed his father to get the gun, saying, "I'll settle with you later. I have a little business with that hawk."

Presently he came back with the gun, just in time to see the hawk swoop down on another pullet. He raised the gun to his shoulder, took quick aim, and pulled the trigger, and the hammer went *click!* But no *bang!* The hawk picked his chicken from the flock and calmly soared away over the treetops into the forest.

Father looked at the hawk, at his gun, and at Snug. Then he sat down on the grass and covered his face with his hands.

Snug hurried over. "What's the matter, Father? Are you hurt?"

"Not much! My only son has broken my heart. I've lost two of my best pullets, and I'd give the whole flock to get even with that rascally hawk, and with the monkey who unloaded my gun. I may live through it, but I don't know whether *you* will!"

But Snug did. His father and mother eventually decided that a grown monkey who foolishly left a loaded gun in the stable was almost as much to blame as the boy who "didn't know the gun was loaded."

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