

MIZ MEPHITIS

By Robert Culp

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With supper over, I went out to find some entertainment to occupy me till dark. I headed for Ma's hollyhocks alongside the garden fence, thinking maybe I'd trap a bee in a blossom and listen to him buzz. Surprise—no bees. A quick check of the moonflowers and clover proved the bees weren't around. For a minute I was stumped. This time of fall those bees were bound to stay out long as there was light. They had a lot of storing up to do before Jack Frost put an end to the flowers.

Then I recalled what Uncle Jake had taught me: a bee was never caught in a shower. When bees stay near the hive, rain is nigh. I squinted at the sky. There was a good drift of clouds moving in from the east. I ran down to the giant live oak standing next to the creek. Pa had sung me this one: Moss dry, sunny sky; moss wet, rain you'll get.

The moss on the north side of that oak's trunk was so wet I could mash water out of it. If that wasn't enough to churn the butter, just then Ma's number one Rhode Island Red cock commenced crowing. Since I was a tyke I'd known, 'when the rooster crows at night, he says that rain's in sight.'

Sure enough, in a short minute the sky was purple-gray, and big drops began splatting onto the oak leaves. I settled against the trunk and watched the creek jump.

Soon the rain was solid. A clap of thunder sounded right behind me. The shower hadn't soaked through my oak umbrella yet, but I was leary of staying under the tree with lightning around. Pa lost a fine Jersey cow summer before last when a bolt hit the hickory tree she was standing under.

I thought about going to the house. It was a while before bedtime; Ma was sure to find some rainy-day chore for me—like scouring the stew kettle, or blacking the stove when it didn't even need it, or spelling words she gave me whilst she busied about the kitchen, or reading my lessons out loud to her. At the house there was no end of possibilities, none particularly fetching. So, for lack of another choice, I ran across the yard into the barn.

It was still light outside, but in the barn night was well started. The place was as dismal as the cattail bog on the night of the new moon. But the barn was dry. Pa kept

the barn tighter than the house. A tarnal haze of fine dust hung in the air. My nose reacted as usual.

“Kerchool!” it said.

“Kerchool!” said I. I always agree with my nose.

“Bless you, young man,” said a voice out of the gloom.

“Who’s there?” I whispered. I caught a glimpse of white in the dark. A pair of sharp eyes glowed at me from the corner where the hay was thrown down from the loft.

“Why, I’m Mrs. Mephitis, dear boy. We’ve howdied several times this summer. From a distance, of course.” She stepped out toward me. Now I recognized that white—the familiar V-shaped stripes of one of our neighborhood skunks.

“Yes, ma’am. I was just leaving. Nice to see you again.” I would have scooted out the way I came in, but she had me cut off.

“Now just sit down, young man. You’re not going out in this storm. You’ll catch your death of cold.”

She sounded like Cotton’s ma lecturing me. Funny how mothers get even more concerned over somebody else’s kid.

“No, ma’am. I mean, yes’m. I’ll just sit over here against the wall. Don’t bother ’bout me. You go on with whatever you’re doing, Miz Mephitis.”

“My, such a polite young man. I wish my children were here to see your example.”

“Your family’s not with you, ma’am?” I reached my arm behind me till I touched the wall. Slow-like, I backed up so I was plumb plastered to it.

“As much as they ever are, these days.” She took another step toward me. “I left them in the orchard, looking for beetles in the stone wall. I doubt they have sense enough to come in out of the rain.”

“Beetles? Do you like beetles, ma’am?” I scrunched against the boards. There was no place for me to go.

“They are delicious! But when the rain threatened, I came in here to find eggs.”

“And your kids didn’t follow you, Miz Mephitis? Every time I saw you this summer, there were those six little skunks tagging along single file. Like a parade.”

“Weren’t they precious! How nice they looked. Tails high, in perfect step.

They made my heart burst with pride.” She almost glowed, remembering it. “They were babies then. Now they’re adolescents—they think they’re grown up. Why, they’ll be six months old next week. And there’s no controlling any of them. I told them to come with me, I’d show them where the eggs were. But no, they were bound and determined to flaunt their independence.”

Actually, I was sort of glad the six kids hadn’t followed Miz Mephitis into the barn. She wasn’t causing me much worry, long as I stayed put. Still and all, I wasn’t prepared to sit looking at a room full of skunks.

“Of course,” she went on, “I’m pleased they’re willing to forage for themselves, even if they don’t know all about it yet. They were such a bother to keep fed. A body never worked so hard. From the time they were two weeks old, I ran myself ragged finding them meat.”

“Meat!” said I, forgetting my danger, “You mean our chickens, I reckon.”

“Well, I suppose we have taken a fat hen now and again.” She sounded embarrassed. Mark one up for my side. “But mostly wild things—snakes, and frogs, and crawdads, and birds. Any bird that roosts on the ground is likely to furnish our dinner sooner or later.”

“And beetles,” I said to show off my lesson.

“Oh, my goodness, yes! Every kind of bug. From caterpillars and crickets to roly-polys and stink bugs.” She didn’t even blink when she said stink bugs. She wasn’t self-conscious about that. “Even bees—especially bees. If we find a hive low enough to reach, we’ll feast for days.”

“Don’t they sting you?”

“Not so’s I’ve ever noticed. Little things don’t trouble you when you’re having a good time.”

I was beginning to believe there was a lot more to skunks than I had imagined. But I’d still feel better if she’d leave. Maybe if she got worried about her kids.

“Miz Mephitis, hadn’t ought you check on your young’uns? Might be something’ll come along and bother the little fellers.”

“Fiddle-dee-dee, dear boy. Everyone respects us skunks. Even Mr. Bear steps off the path for us. I don’t think we have any enemies those young skunks need fear.”

“They’re kind of, uh, dangerous? Young as they are?” I didn’t want to be pushy about that issue, but I was curious.

“More so because they are young. They’re fully armed. At their age, they get excited and blast away at the slightest provocation. Often at some unruly and ignorant hound pup.” She smiled.

I knew what she meant—Flitter’s pups. All the dogs had gone with Pa to the upper pasture after dinner. But it was fast getting dark. They’d be back any minute, if the rain hadn’t already chased ’em home. I didn’t want the pups to tangle with the young skunks. Or with Miz Mephitis, for that matter. I had to do something soon.

First, I thought I’d better check Miz Mephitis’s intentions. “You don’t, uh, blast away like your kids do?”

“No, indeed, young man. Not if I can help it. There’s seldom a need to. And I would never spray anyone without giving fair warning.”

“What kind of warning?”

“Well, I stamp my feet, and snarl as fiercely as I can. That usually suffices.”

Yes'm. I'll remember that." I was getting a powerful education this evening.

"Anyhow, Miz Mephitis, I think you best be taking your kids away from our barnyard fore someone happens on 'em." I had to get her moving. "Folks round here don't hold with polecats; claim you eat too many eggs and chickens."

Whooeey, did she swell up at that. I reckon I pushed a little much.

"Polecats!" she sniffed. "Indeed! We skunks consider that word a slur."

"Beg pardon, ma'am. I didn't know. From here on, it's 'skunk' by me. Word of honor." I was truly sorry.

"Dear boy. I'm sure you meant no offense." She switched back to her lecturing voice. "But you folks are wrong to declare war on us over a few chickens. We skunks pay our way. We do a good job of keeping down the rodents and insects around the place. Why, in your barn I've wiped out a dozen nests of mice already this summer. How can you begrudge me an egg now and then?"

"Yes'm. I know skunks are valuable. Uncle lake swears by his skunk fat cold medicine."

"Skunk fat! Well I never: That's horrible." She was upset, no doubt about it. Her legs were stiff and all her fur was standing on end. "You don't suppose a skunk gives up any fat willingly?" She stamped her forefeet at me.

I froze. I didn't even breathe till she quit sputtering and began to calm down. Finally her fur lay flat, and things looked safe again. I took a slow, deep breath.

"Dear, dear boy. I'm sure you didn't realize how you hurt my sensibilities. Youngsters never do."

"I'm sorry, Miz Mephitis."

"I believe you are. Don't worry your little head about it. You'll learn. You're a fine, sensitive lad, I can tell." She sighed. "I said we skunks had no enemies. That's not quite right. It's true, a man with a gun is a real threat to a skunk. It seems unfair, standing back out of reach like that."

It didn't seem right. But I wasn't anxious for her to blame people. Not while she had me cornered. "Miz Mephitis, you must have some natural enemies. Everything does."

"Well, only one, really. Owls kill skunks. **In** the dark, our white stripes are like a beacon to an owl's night eyes." She turned thoughtful. "I'm a widow, you know. Early in the summer—it was a warm, beautiful night—we were walking down the path by the creek. I knew where some turtle eggs were buried. We never heard a sound." She sniffed. This time she was crying. "Suddenly, Mr. Mephitis was lifted up in the air in the cruel claws of a great horned owl. It was a minute before I grasped what had happened. There was nothing to be done."

She was silent for a long time. "I've had to raise the children by myself. It's been

hard. Perhaps that's why they misbehave so."

"I'm sure they're good kids, Miz Mephitis." I didn't know what to say. Neither of us said any more for a while.

The rain had let up. I heard Pa whistling outside. I panicked. Flitter and the pups would be with him. He was bound to come into the barn. For sure, we were in for a point-blank spraying.

The barn door swung open. Pa and Flitter stood blocking the way, both of them blinking at Miz Mephitis as if they couldn't believe there was a skunk ten feet in front of them.

Miz Mephitis was as cool as first frost. She arched her splendiferous tail, pointed her nose into the air, and marched straight for Pa and Flitter. Pa and that hound dog backed off to either side, and Miz Mephitis walked proudly between them. She acted just like Ma going to church all spiffed up in new finery.

Flitter was a smart old hound; she never made a move toward that skunk. I was worried that the pups would spot Miz Mephitis and cause a real ruckus. But the pups were still romping around up on the hill. Fortunately.

Pa looked at me sitting by the far wall. "Rooster, what in the world were you doing shut up in the barn with that skunk?"

I just shrugged.