

THE GOLDEN CARROTS

By Eric A. Kimmel

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ONCE upon a time in the State of Illinois there lived a rabbit. And this rabbit had a tail, round and fluffy as a puffball, of which he was extremely proud. He lived in an old badger tunnel underneath the roots of a great oak tree. The tunnel was warm and snug, but what made it better was its location—a hop and a jump from the most luscious, delicious, mouth-watering carrot patch in the State of Illinois.

Now this carrot patch belonged to a farmer named Dead-Eye John McGill. The people of Vermilion County called him Dead-Eye because when he aimed his rifle, he never missed. Folks said that if he set his mind to it, Dead-Eye John McGill could shoot a fly off a telephone wire at the other end of Indiana. No one had ever seen him do it, of course, but he was a fine shot all the same. He was also mighty proud of his carrot patch.

One day in late July, Dead-Eye John McGill noticed that something was happening to his fine carrots. The day before he had counted one hundred and forty-eight thousand, three hundred and ninety-six carrots, and today there were only one hundred and forty-eight thousand, three hundred and eighty-five.

“Rabbits!” Dead-Eye John McGill said to himself. “Rabbits must be eating my carrots. I’ll show them!”

That night he sat on his porch, rifle on his knee, watching his carrot patch. The moon was hardly halfway up in the sky when he heard the sounds of something nibbling and crunching away in his field. Dead-Eye John McGill raised his rifle, took aim at the fluffy white spot bobbing up and down in the moonlight, and fired.

The rabbit leaped up and ran for his life. Only when he reached the safety of the oak tree did he put his head between his legs to look at the damage. The shot had clipped the tail off that poor rabbit, clean as a hound’s tooth. It hurt to be shot, but losing his tail hurt his pride even more.

“My tail!” the poor rabbit wailed. “My lovely, fluffy tail! It’s . . . it’s gone!”

What was he to do? How could he face the other rabbits without his tail? A rabbit without a tail, you see, feels very much like a man without his trousers.

The rabbit hung his head low, feeling sorry for himself and wondering what he was going to do. He didn't even notice the great grey wolf creeping up behind him until the wolf grabbed him by the ears and held him tight.

"Let me go!" cried the rabbit, who figured he'd had his just share of trouble for one day. "Shoo! Go back where you came from, Wolf! There aren't any wolves in the State of Illinois!"

"There are so," laughed the big grey wolf. "Ever since I got off the train at ten o'clock this morning. And nothing would please me more than some nice, hot rabbit stew."

"Please let me go!" the rabbit pleaded. "You don't want to eat me. I'm skinny and tough—I don't even have a tail!"

"I don't like tails," said the wolf.

Poor rabbit! Unless he thought of something, tail or no tail, he would wind up in the wolf's pot.

Suddenly he had an idea.

"Wait a bit, Wolf," the rabbit cried. "I know a secret, and if you let me go, I'll share it with you—and then you'll be rich. Wouldn't you like to be rich? You wouldn't have to eat rabbit anymore; you could eat steak. Three times a day."

The wolf liked steak. "I'm listening," he said.

"Just a little way down from the great oak tree is a carrot patch," the rabbit whispered. "The finest carrot patch in the State of Illinois. Now I know for a fact that hidden somewhere in that carrot patch are fourteen solid gold carrots. Why, each one must be worth thousands of dollars. Old Man McGill is the only farmer in the State of Illinois who knows how to grow them, and he only grows fourteen a year—just enough to pay his bills. He keeps it so secret that the only other person in the whole world who knows about it is me, because I spend a lot of time in that carrot patch. What's the matter, Wolf? Don't you believe me?"

The wolf frowned, showing his great sharp teeth. "It sure sounds mighty peculiar, solid gold carrots growing in a carrot patch. I never heard of such a thing in my life."

"Of course you have!" the rabbit laughed. "Do you mean to tell me you never heard of fourteen carrot gold? Where did you think gold carrots came from?"

The wolf blushed and scratched his head. "Rabbit," he said, "come to think of it, I believe you're right. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow night," the rabbit said. "You take a sack and sneak down to the carrot patch. Dig up all the carrots you can; I'll tell you if any are gold. Solid gold carrots taste different, you know, and only a rabbit can tell the difference."

The wolf didn't like the sound of that.

“Think I’m a fool, eh?” he growled. “While I’m digging carrots, what’s to stop you from running away? I’m too smart for you, Rabbit. You’re coming along with me, tied up in the sack. When I find a gold carrot, I’ll let you go and not before.”

The poor rabbit had to agree.

The next night when the moon was high, the wolf dropped the rabbit into his sack and scurried down the path to Dead-Eye John McGill’s carrot patch to dig up golden carrots. The wolf scratched and scratched and finally pulled up a big orange carrot which he stuffed in his sack.

“Is that a golden carrot?” he asked the rabbit.

The rabbit was very hungry, for he hadn’t had a bite to eat all day.

“No,” he called to the wolf after taking a bite. “Too salty.” And he gobbled the carrot down.

The wolf dug up two more carrots. “What about these?” he asked.

“No,” the rabbit mumbled, his mouth full of delicious carrot. “Too sweet.”

The wolf dug up carrot after carrot, but not one was made of gold. It wasn’t long before the rabbit had eaten his fill, for though the carrots were too hard or too soft or too long or too short to be golden, there was nothing wrong with the way they tasted. There were enough carrots left over to feed the rabbit for two weeks.

Now while the wolf was digging and the rabbit was eating, Dead-Eye John McGill’s wife woke up and looked out the window. She could hardly believe her eyes.

“John! Get your gun!” she hollered. “There’s a wolf in our carrot patch making off with our carrots.”

“You’re dreaming, Bertha.” Dead-Eye John McGill yawned as he pulled the pillow over his head. “Wolves don’t eat carrots, and even if they did, there aren’t any wolves in the State of Illinois.”

The wolf was very angry that not a single carrot out of that great pile was made of gold.

“Maybe we’ll have better luck tomorrow,” the rabbit said timidly.

“We’d better,” the wolf growled. “We’d better.”

The next night was as bad as the first, and not a single gold carrot did they find. The wolf was furious. “I’m going back just one more time,” he told the terrified rabbit. “By tomorrow night I’ll either have a solid gold carrot—or I’ll be eating rabbit stew.”

The rabbit did not like the sound of that at all.

That night, when the full moon was high in the sky, the wolf stuck the rabbit in the sack and slunk down to the carrot patch for the last time. But he was so angry and so disgusted and so tired of digging carrots, that he growled and roared and snarled and made so much noise that he woke up Dead-Eye John McGill himself.

“Must be a mighty big rabbit,” Dead-Eye grumbled sleepily as he loaded his rifle and poked his head out of the window. Lo and behold, down in the carrot patch was a great grey wolf, huffing and puffing and digging up his fine carrots by the bushel.

“Land o’ Goshen!” Dead-Eye John McGill swore to himself. “A wolf stealing carrots in the State of Illinois! Why, it’s unnatural! It’s un-American!”

Dead-Eye raised his rifle, fired, and missed—or at least he missed what he was aiming at. You see, he meant to set a hole right between that wolf’s eyes, but instead, the bullet clipped off the wolf’s tail, clean as a hound’s tooth.

The rabbit didn’t wait around long enough to see it fall. At the sound of the shot he scrambled out of the sack and ran for the oak tree as fast as his legs could carry him. He didn’t stick so much as the tip of his nose outside the badger tunnel the whole month it took for his tail to grow back. But don’t feel too sorry for him. The tunnel was so full of carrots, the rabbit had more than enough to take him right through the winter.

As for the wolf, he hopped aboard the first northbound train to Canada, for reasons of health, and was never seen in the State of Illinois again.

Dead-Eye John McGill ended up with a fine grey wolf tail to hang over his fireplace, which more than made up for missing a shot and losing a few carrots. His picture was on the front page of every newspaper in three counties, and if you ask him, he’ll be more than glad to tell you how he shot the tail off a carrot-thieving wolf on a pitch-black night.

And to this day, not a single solid gold carrot has been found in the State of Illinois.