



The squirrel that wouldn't learn to sweep

Description



Once upon a time, in a beautiful beech forest, there were eleven little squirrel brothers, all eleven of them living together. They had made their home on an old crow's nest, at a high enfourchure. They played from morning to night among the sunny branches at hide-and-seek, perched squirrel, jumping squirrel, or danced rounds in the clearing.

And their old grandmother, who was no longer very alert, watched over them from the doorway, always knitting mufflers for them and coughing with a nice clear cough, as a warning, when one of her eleven grandsons started something foolish.

The smallest was called Guerlinguet. He was a little lazy and especially very obstinate, but so funny, so lively and quick, with such a pretty and smart face that one had to love him in spite of everything.

Every evening, as soon as dinner was over, a squirrel would put away the walnut shell dishes and fold the yellowed leaf napkins. And another squirrel would sweep the cabin with his tail. Guerlinguet removed the dishes with reasonable grace, but he didn't like to sweep. When he couldn't dodge the chore, he would turn the room three times and flick the moss carpet three times. Not a crumb was even moved, and his older brothers would be forced to redo his chore, which made them very angry.



And his good grandmother would say to him, I know, Guerlinguet, I know why you don't want to learn to sweep. You're afraid to spoil your beautiful varnished red tail, like the autumn nannyberry, bushy and long as can be. But it would not spoil it, my boy. When a tail gets dusty, you wash it with the morning dew, running it through the green leaves, wipe it on the thin bark of the beech tree, then strut in the sun to finish drying it. This gives strength to the hair. It grows brighter and thicker. But Guerlinguet shook his head, and didn't sweep any more.



One day, when he had been left in front of the work, and had gone to build himself a ladder, without even pretending to dust, his elders lost their patience, and his grandmother finally said: Listen, Guerlinguet, this can't go on. Since you don't want to learn to sweep, we'll kick you out of the house. You will have to eat dinner by heart ([see definition](#)); you will sleep under the stars; if you wish to have fun, you will waltz alone with your tail, and maybe, by bad luck, you will be eaten by the wolf.

And the little Guerlinguet, who was very stubborn, answered his grandmother:

– I don't mind eating dinner by heart, I don't mind sleeping under the stars, I don't mind being eaten by the wolf, but I don't want to learn to sweep.



– Agreed, said the grandmother: you may take your bundle and seek lodging wherever you wish.

Guerlinguet took his bundle and walked away without looking back, feeling his heart heavy, but he did not want to show it. He followed his path straight ahead, leaping from branch to branch and repeating higher and higher:

– I want to dine out, I want to sleep under the stars, I want to be eaten by the wolf, but I don't want to learn to sweep.

As he reasoned and jumped, without taking care of his legs, he suddenly missed his branch and poof! he fell on the back of the wolf who was sleeping. The wolf, awakened with a start, stood up, terrible, and opened its big mouth to bite him. But Guerlinguet, all in his mind, sat down on his tail in front of him, and said in his stubborn voice:

– I will be crunched, Monsieur le Loup, but I will not learn to sweep.



The wolf was so surprised that he closed his big mouth. He examined the squirrel and began to scratch his ear.

– It's too complicated for me, » he said at last. You'll have to come and explain it to my cousin the fox.

He took Guerlinguet by the skin of his back, brinque-balli-brinqueballant, head here and tail there, and he carried him in his mouth while swinging him. Cousin Fox was polishing his nails in the shade of a dogwood tree. When he heard someone coming, he got up to stretch.

– Look, cousin, » said the wolf, putting Guerlinguet under his nose. Here's a squirrel who doesn't want to learn to sweep.



– And what do you care? » said the fox. You don't need that to bite it.

– I'm certainly not going to eat him, » said the wolf. I am the most important wolf in the country. Everyone knows that I am used to a select diet. How would I look if I ate a squirrel who didn't know anything?

– I didn't think of that, » said the fox, « we have to do something about it. And why is he so stubborn, this little one?

– Mr. Fox, » said Guerlinguet politely, « Mr. Wolf may not eat me, but my grandmother has put me out. I will have to eat by heart; I will not sow crumbs on the moss: I do not need to learn to sweep.

– He is right, said the fox who laughed under his breath. If you want to teach him, compère Loup, you must give him food.

– I understood, said the wolf, keep him for me. And hup! and hup! The wolf runs through the thicket; he runs, he trots to his den; he pulls from his reserve a large quarter of bleeding flesh and returns to throw it in front of the squirrel.

– Swallow, » he said to Guerlinguet, « this is your lunch. Guerlinguet looked at the meat, his head a little to the side:

– Oh, no, said Guerlinguet, I don't eat meat.

– That's fine, said the wolf; I know what you need.

And hup! and hup! the wolf resumes his race through the thicket; he runs, he trots to a field of potatoes. He scratches and digs, fills a bag and runs back.

– There! » said Compère Loup, emptying his bag in front of Guerlinguet, « swallow your lunch.

Guerlinguet pushed a little, with the tip of his paw, the raw potatoes all earthy.

– Oh no, » he said, « I don't eat potatoes.

– You don't know anything about it, fellow, » said the fox, who was very amused; « squirrels eat fruit. I will give you one of my fox cubs to guide you.

And hup! And hup! Brother Wolf, a little out of breath, resumed his race behind the fox cub. The fox cub takes him to the hazelnuts, to the harvest of the beechnuts and the pine cones. Then, in the garden of a woodcutter, he makes him steal walnuts, apples, pears, and some bunches of grapes. The wolf was not accustomed to these gatherings, he sweated and blew with pleasure. Finally he saw his basket full, and he brought it back to Guerlinguet who was waiting for him quietly, sitting in the shadow of his tail, in the moss, under the guard of cousin Renard. Guerlinguet broke, then nibbled the walnuts and hazelnuts; he peeled the fairies at leisure; he cracked the pine kernels under his fine teeth. Never had he savored such a delicious snack. He flexed his muscles with every bite. He opened the apples and pears to feast on the seeds. He sucked the fresh juice from the grapes. Finally he polished his whiskers; he dusted off his white vest and swelled his red tail into a plume.

II

– Well! » said Cousin Fox to him, « you have not dined by heart. I think that you are happy?

– Yes, said Guerlinguet, but I don't want to learn to sweep.

When the fox heard this, and saw the discomfited look on the wolf's face, he laughed until he held his ribs.



– He's too clever, your friend, » he said to his friend the Wolf. He'll come and tell his story in front of my friend the badger who has the cleanest burrow in the woods and certainly knows all about sweeping and brooms. He will advise us.

Oops! Cousin Fox delicately took Guerlinguet by the skin of his back, brinqueballi-brinqueballant, head here and tail there, and carried him away in his mouth while swinging him.

Friend Badger was dreaming in the sun at the entrance of his burrow. He is always in a sad mood and grunts or whines through his teeth. When he saw the fox and the wolf approaching, and Guerlinguet wisely letting himself be carried, he stood up with a sigh.

– Look, friend Badger, » said the fox, placing his prisoner between his paws. Here is a squirrel who does not want to learn to sweep.

– Alas! what are you worrying about? » said the badger; « do you take him for a valet? Wouldn't it be better to share him with us?

– That's my opinion, » said the fox, « but my friend Wolf doesn't want to eat anything but learned squirrels. We need your help in this matter.

– That's another thing, said the badger. And what's stopping your ninny from studying such a simple science? Did you ask him?

– Mr. Badger, » said Guerlinguet peacefully, « Mr. Wolf didn't eat me and I didn't eat my dinner by heart, but my grandmother and my brothers threw me out. I have to sleep under the stars. Since I don't have a home anymore, I don't need to learn to sweep.

– This squirrel is common sense, » said the badger. If you want him to sweep, you must build him a house.

– I understood, said Compère Loup; keep him for me.

And hup! and hup! the wolf takes his course. He comes back rolling a big stone, then he brings two, then three; he drags some heavy dead branches, a bundle of thorns and a clod of mud. He piles the whole thing up with his nose to build a kind of low cave, which reminded him in a small way of his lair.

– Enter there, » he said to Guerlinguet, « you are now lodged. – It is open to all winds, said Guerlinguet. I do not live in these houses.

– I know what suits him, said the badger. I will help you, compère Loup. We'll dig him a burrow.

And groum! and groum! the wolf and the badger sank into the sand side by side, digging with their snouts and claws, throwing the pebbles behind them.

The poor wolf sneezed and panted; the gravel stung his eyes; he even broke a nail. At last the burrow was finished.

– Come in there, » said the badger to Guerlinguet, « you are now lodged.

– It is dark there like in a mole's house, said Guerlinguet; I do not live in the houses under ground.

– You know nothing about it, my friends, said the fox; squirrels nest on trees. I will give you one of my fox cubs who will show you what to bring me. I will make myself master of the site.

But friend Badger did not want to go. And hup! and hup! the wolf all alone resumed his race behind the fox cub. In the low coppices and the heaths, he collected heather, broom, moss, then advised by the fox, he had to arrange them in the hollow trunk of an old oak. His clumsy paws were busy weaving the walls and leveling the ground while the badger wasted clay pellets to consolidate everything. Finally the cone roof was laid, and the wolf was able to wake Guerlinguet, who was snoozing, curled up in a ball in the fine grass, his nose between his paws and his tail in the sun, still guarded by the fox.

Guerlinguet considered the pretty, fresh and well-enclosed lodge, which smelled good of broom and heather. He tried the moss mattresses, he tested the walls with his paw. Finally he sat down on the threshold, with a satisfied air of owner.

– Well, » said his friend Badger, « you will not sleep under the stars! It seems to me that everything is arranged?

– No, » said Guerlinguet, « I don't want to learn to sweep.

When the badger heard this, he was very embarrassed, especially since the wolf was showing his teeth and the fox was laughing.

– We must take him to Mrs. Owl, » he said at last, looking sorry. She is close to the squirrels and knows everything about them.

– Perhaps she will help us out.

The badger grabbed Guerlinguet by the skin of his back, brinqueballi-brinqueballant, head here and tail there, and carried him away in his mouth, half dragging him, half swinging him. Cousin Fox trotted along, and the wolf followed on three legs.

Madame Owl is a compassionate person. She lives in a hollow rock, close to the beech tree where grandmother squirrel and her grandchildren have made their home. She knew Guerlinguet well and she would have liked to rescue him.

– Look at this, Mrs. Owl, » said the badger as he laid Guerlinguet on the moss. Here's a squirrel who doesn't want to learn to sweep.

– And what are you meddling with? said the owl. It's his family's business. Let him go home.

– I wouldn't mind, » said the badger. But, for our fellow wolf, it is a question of dignity. He doesn't think it's a good idea to eat him until his education is perfect.

– So I'll take care of it, said the owl. Let's see, Guerlinguet, why are you being lazy?



– Madame la Chouette, » said Guerlinguet, raising his bold little nose, « Monsieur le Loup has not eaten me, I have not dined by heart, I will not sleep under the stars, but my grandmother has chased me away and my little brothers no longer want to play with me. If I want to have fun, I will have to waltz alone with my tail. I don't have the heart to learn to sweep.

– Who could blame you? » cried the owl. It's too obvious, my friends. He's melancholy, this little fellow. Before thinking of educating him, you must dance with him.

– That suits me, says cousin Renard: in place for the contredanse.

– It does not suit me at all, said the wolf; I understand well that it is necessary to dance, but I ran so much, dug so much, built so much, that my poor legs are stiff as wood!...

But nobody listened to him. A blackbird, on a branch, whistled the tune of the bourrée and the dancers chose their places. And when the ritornello came back, here was the unfortunate wolf, exhausted but ready to do everything in conscience, who took his momentum like the others. And hup!... and hup!... he followed the measure as best he could, leaping and shimmying, with bows and curtseys, with entrechats and jetté-battus and even cabrioles. The fox, in front of him, was doing a little jig, his front legs on his hips, without losing sight of Guerlinguet. The good big badger waddled from one flank to the other, too heavy to strain himself any better, and the owl, his opposite, with his wings half raised, pirouetted with great grace.



Never has one seen such a bourrée. Guerlinguet, who was crazy about dancing, made the most beautiful cavalier alone. He waltzed, turned, fluttered, swishing his tail, amused himself like a hundred squirrels, frivolous and whirling.

His ten little brothers and sisters, attracted by the noise, came to stand on a branch and they looked, quite astonished, at all this brilliant assembly which was giving the ball at Guerlinguet.

After the bourrée it was a branle, after the branle a rigodon. When Guerlinguet was tired of jumping, he sat on a mushroom and watched the others spin, fanning himself with the tip of his tail.



Finally the rigodon came to an end. The wolf, surrendered, rolled onto the grass, and everyone caught their breath.

– Well, well! Guerlinguet, » said the owl, winking his big green eye, « we have stood up to the dances, you have not waltzed alone with your tail. I think that you are satisfied?

– It doesn't matter, » said Guerlinguet. I don't want to learn to sweep.

When the wolf heard this, he lost his courage, raised his head, opened his mouth, and began to howl like a desperate man. And hou... hoot... hou... the whole wood resounded. The weasels and the young weasels showed their noses at the holes of the old trunks; the green lizards risked a glance between two clumps of colchicum; the small birds gathered in their wings to know the troubles of the wolf.

He would have howled until evening if it hadn't been for a little clear cough, high up in the tree above his head, that made him stop suddenly.

It was grandmother squirrel, who was leaning a little between the leaves, sitting at the threshold of her house.

She was very frightened to see her grandson imprisoned by so many dangerous beasts, but she did not let it show, and knitted with a quiet air.

– Why do you deafen us, compère Loup? she said. Is it my mutinous Guerlinguet who torments you?

– Yes! Yes! Yes! It's your Guerlinguet: he doesn't want to learn to sweep!

– I know it well, said the grandmother; I have a little rheumatism in my legs, and I cannot go to lecture him, but it is enough to send him to me. I'll stretch out his ears, and I tell you he'll sweep away.

– I wouldn't advise that, my friend, » huffed the fox; « when a squirrel is let loose, you need wings to

catch him.

– That's fine, » growled the wolf. He'll go and I won't let him go; my teeth will hold his tail. Come on, squirrel, climb up there, so that your grandmother can lengthen your ears.

Hup! Compère Loup grabbed Guerlinguet's tail in his mouth, and pushed him to climb the beech tree.

But Guerlinguet had to reach the end of his long tail while the wolf stood up on his hind legs, but he could not reach very high.

– You are far from counting, said the fox; perch on my shoulders, my friend, and especially do not drop the tail.

The wolf climbed on the shoulders of the fox who stood upright against the tree, but Guerlinguet barely touched the first leaves.

– We are not there, said the fox, come here, friend Badger, that you lend me your shoulders.



The badger lent his shoulders and made himself as tall as he could, carrying the fox, who carried the wolf, who held Guerlinguet by the tail.

– We are almost there, said the badger. Come here, Mrs. Owl, lend me your shoulders.

– You do not think of it, our friend, said the owl: you are too heavy for me to carry you. I'll pinch the

hairs on the back of your neck in my beak and pull with my wings; that way I'll help you up on this root.

The owl pulled the badger by the hairs, the badger climbed up the root, lifting the fox, who lifted the wolf, who held Guerlinguet by the tail, and the little squirrel reached his grandmother.

– Here we are, said the malignant grandmother. I'll pull his ears. You hold his tail well, compère Loup? you are not afraid to let go?

– No, no, said the wolf, opening his mouth to answer, you can pull, I hold it firmly.

But as soon as he loosened his teeth, Guerlinguet, feeling his tail free, jumped to get out of the way, throwing two good clawed kicks at the wolf's muzzle.

The wolf lost his balance; he fell backwards on the fox, which fell on the head of the badger, which tumbled from its root, dragging the owl with it.

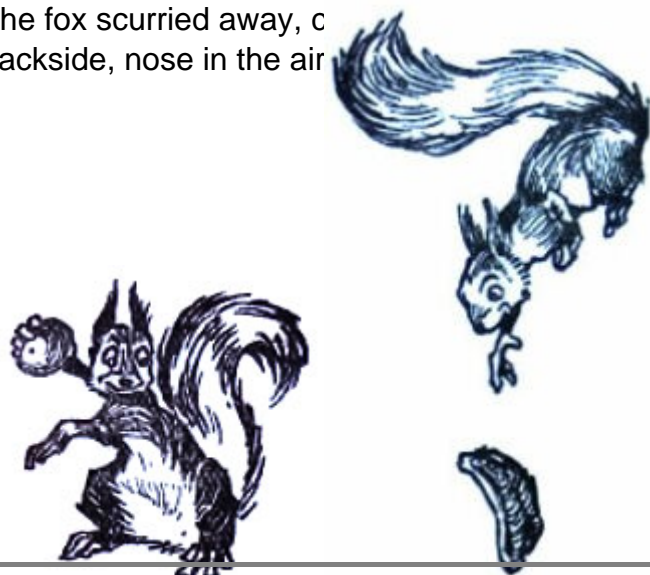


The owl flew back to its nest, comfortable and singing victory.

The badger dived into its underground.

The fox scurried away, c
backside, nose in the air

nd the poor wolf was left all alone, sitting on his
ng red hairs still hanging from his teeth.



All the squirrels, on their tree, laughed at his

bewildered look: they threw fawn shells, bits of bark, twigs at him, until he could gather his wits and ran away without understanding, furious, ashamed and ground.

The little squirrels, very happy to find their brother, jumped all ten around him.

– You see, Guerlinguet, they said, you see what happened to you. This is what it means to be stubborn.

– And what happened to me? » replied Guerlinguet, swinging from a branch; « and what happened to me? The wolf didn't bite me; I didn't eat dinner by heart; I didn't sleep under the stars; I didn't waltz around with my tail and I didn't learn to sweep.

But, because he was basically a sweet little squirrel and wanted to please his grandmother, after this adventure he still learned to sweep.



First chapter of Tales of the Luisant Worm, written by Jeanne Roche-Mazon (1885-1953), illustrated by O'Klein (1893-1985 – Courtesy of the heirs).

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