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How the Buffalo lost a War

The homeland of the Pawnee tribe stretched across vast prairies in the central plains of what is now the United States. Millions of buffalo ranged there. Buffalo meat and hide gave the Pawnees food, clothing and shelter. The Pawnees believed that a race of giant creatures once ruled Pawnee land. The giants met their downfall because of their pride and their lack of attention to smaller creatures. Several Pawnee stories are based on this belief. One of them is this legend, “How the Buffalo Lost a War.”

One day near the beginning of winter, the field mouse stepped out of her nest of dried grass in the small prairie meadow. She sniffed the crisp, tangy air. Soon, she knew, the north wind would sweep the prairie with his frost-tipped wings. It was time, she thought, to gather her food. For there would be long, cold days and nights ahead. While the mouse searched busily for wild beans in the tall grass, a buffalo bull came into the meadow to graze. The sight of the huge, shaggy beast alarmed the little mouse. She was afraid he would eat most of the grass, and he might mow down the rest with his hooves and his rough tongue. “They’ll be no place left in which to hide,” said the mouse to herself as she hurried towards the newcomer.

“Greetings!” said the mouse to the buffalo. “Welcome to the meadow, but do save a small patch of it for me, won’t you?” The buffalo, munching on a mouthful of grass, did not look at her. The mouse was about to repeat her plea in a louder tone of voice when she saw the huge beast step on her nest of dried grass. “Ho, buffalo!” squeaked the mouse, her whiskers bristling. “Thanks to your big hoof, you’ve destroyed my only shelter from the north wind! Leave this meadow at once. If you don’t, I’ll challenge you to a war!” The buffalo looked down with scorn at the mouse. “Don’t be foolish, little one!” he snorted. “You’re far too small to wage war with me, a mighty giant!”

A moment later, the buffalo felt a tickle inside his right ear. He shook his head from side to side and twitched his ears back and forth, but the tickly feeling only increased. Flinging his tail in the air, he ran straight ahead. Then, he ran in circles. At last, he stopped abruptly. The mouse jumped out of his ear and to the ground. The buffalo stared with surprise at the mouse. “Ho! So you’re the one who’s been tickling me!” he exclaimed angrily. “I’ll show you what happens to little ones who have no respect for mighty giants!” Lowering his huge head, the big beast charged at the tiny mouse, but she quickly sprang on top of the beast’s head.

Once more the buffalo felt a maddening tickle. This time it was inside his left ear. Bellowing with rage, he pawed the air with his front hooves. He tore up the grass with his sharp horns. Then, he wheeled about and galloped out of the meadow. In a cloud of dust, he plunged recklessly down a rocky hillside. At last, he stopped in the valley below. The mouse leaped out of his ear and to the ground. Then her enemy turned and ran away. “Do you still claim I’m too small to wage war with you, O mighty giant?” the mouse called after him. She listened for his reply, but all she heard was the faint pounding of hooves in the distance.