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WHO CAN SOLVE THE RIDDLE OF THE COATI?

By

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"Well, what in the name of goodness are they?" asked a friend who stood gaping at our "snookum bears." He was looking at two little animals huddled in a corner of a large cage with their arms around each other, casting sheepish, timid glances from faces streaked in a clownish manner with orange and brown. They were about the size of raccoons with long, faintly ringed tails, coarse hoary-tipt hair above, running into reddish-brown underneath, black feet with bearlike claws, short, round ears, and most confusing of all, long, flexible noses that curved up or down so that they might catch any strange scent on the air.

"It's easier to tell what they are not," I replied. "Snookum bears are not cataloged in any book I can find, so this pair is traveling under a trade name. All I know is, any one who tries to trace their ancestry will run into some problems."

Just then a sudden noise frightened the freaks. One dashed excitedly about with his long tail sticking up like a balance pole. A monkey! And that tail looked as if it almost had the ability to reach out, feel and hook on to things. Why not? The other scampered up a fir tree. Half-way up he was perfectly at home and played around on the branches, but when

he got out where the limbs were slender and wobbly, he lost his footing. He went up easily, but he came down hard. Only luck saved him. He fell in a most unscientific manner, back first, and by the merest chance came to port squarely on the top of a woven wire fence that catapulted him into the air and plumped him on the ground eight feet away. He must have been as tough as a hickory nut, for even his feelings were not ruffled. Indeed, he straightway climbed another tree as if the fall was just a part of the game and he wanted to try it again. Then he took more time coming down, head first and hanging on with the claws of his hind feet very much like a red squirrel. He might be part monkey, but still the clue was not clear.

All at once the big male reached back and began to scratch with both paws hand over hand with a combing movement. The scratching didn't seem to satisfy him, so he turned up his nose at an angle where he could bring his underslung mouth into play for a good simian nibble on the hip.

"Now monkeys are not carnivorous," interposed the friend. "What do these fellows eat? Let's try them on a chunk of meat." So a piece of beef was put down in front of them. The result was immediate. The little female lifted her prying proboscis and sniffed the air. Then she reached eagerly for the meat. But why should she think of touching that fragrant morsel before her better-half tried it? With a piglike poke

of the nose he shoved her back into the corner while he glowered over the meat till he should feel ready to eat what he wanted of it. But the lady in the case had a mind of her own frequently, and then there was a real combat of noses with much squeaking and grunting, until she retired to her corner. Later on we adopted the custom of separating their food into two portions at some distance apart. Even then, however, her piggish partner shuffled back and forth to her dish and carried off the most prized bits of food. Then he would squat bearlike on his haunches, picking up hunks of it in his paws and shoving one bite after another into his mouth with the propensity of a real porker.

It hadn't occurred to any one to suspect these eccentric creatures of intelligence, but one of them surprized his guardians by showing "a good deal of ingenuity in solving a problem that was put up to him." As it happened--

He was tied and had only a limited space to move about. A tobacco box was lying just out of reach. After stretching himself as far as possible, he could not reach the box with his front paws. Then he turned around with his back to the box, but couldn't reach it with his hind foot. Suddenly he discovered that his tail might be useful. It reached out close to the curious object. Crooking the end of his tail, he drew the box within reach and satisfied his burning curiosity.

The late E. W. Nelson, former chief of the Biological

Survey, made studies of the coati in Mexico. Occasionally, these animals cross the border into the United States. Mr. Nelson says, "I was in the forest one day when I heard something jump to the ground and run off into the leaves. I stooped to look in the underbrush and saw a small animal running away with its tail high in the air. A moment later another one scrambled down from the tree and made off in another direction; and soon they were raining down from all the near-by trees. They had been feeding on wild figs and other fruit, and when one of them was scared all the others in the band immediately jumped and took to cover. They are good climbers and are equally expert in running swiftly through the jungle."

They are, indeed, fond of fruit. We offered them every morning a number of apples for breakfast, as well as a banana each and any other odd fruit that was left from our table. Old Snook would take a whole apple in his paws, sit up, and eat it with great gusto. Then he would start in on his real meal, which consisted of some chopped-up fresh meat, cooked vegetables, and bread with sugar or syrup on it, or a bowl of bread and milk. In the season of small fruits I remember how pleased both Snooks were to have little French prunes brought in for them. These prunes are as sweet as honey when dead ripe. Snook would push one after another into his mouth with the seeds and juice dropping down in front of him. It was fun to feed the Snooks. They enjoyed their meals so much. They were

not finicky, but always shoved their long noses about in the food to see just which thing they wanted to begin on, and they always began on the best first, which was something sweet. You should have seen custard pie go down! What a smacking and licking of gooey paws! Then they licked each other's faces to get the last taste. My, but they were busy at it!

Now, where could the pie propensity have come from in a Mexican forest? Down there this little animal is called by naturalists *coati mundi*. A coati is an American plantigrade carnivorous quadruped. This is as confusing as the looks of the animal itself. His scientific name is *Nasua narica*, which is appropriate because it has something to do with his long, rubbery nose. But you can't catch a Mexican calling him any of these names. He is simply a tejon, or a racoon.

We had surmised all along that Snook's family tree was connected with that of the racoon. The raccoon has a long tail, a brush, instead of a club like the snookum bear's. The raccoon's face isn't orange and brown, and his nose isn't made of rubber, but you can't be too particular when you are hunting for ancestors. Perhaps you have heard of that tracer of your family tree called the Mendelian law, which finds out that your children may look like you, or they may look like your neighbor, especially in the third or fourth generation. Socially this is bad, but it's right for coons.