

Peter Sees Two Terrible Feathered Hunters

by Thornton W. Burgess

While it is true that Peter Rabbit likes winter, it is also true that life is anything but easy for him that season. In the first place he has to travel about a great deal to get sufficient food, and that means that he must run more risks. There isn't a minute of day or night that he is outside of the dear Old Briar-patch when he can afford not to watch and listen for danger. You see, at this season of the year, Reddy Fox often finds it difficult to get a good meal. He is hungry most of the time, and he is forever hunting for Peter Rabbit. With snow on the ground and no leaves on the bushes and young trees, it is not easy for Peter to hide. So, as he travels about, the thought of Reddy Fox is always in his mind.

But there are others whom Peter fears even more, and these wear feathers instead of fur coats. One of these is Terror the Goshawk. Peter is not alone in his fear of Terror. There is not one among his feathered friends who will not shiver at the mention of Terror's name. Peter will not soon forget the day he discovered that Terror had come down from the Far North, and was likely to stay for the rest of the winter. Peter went hungry all the rest of that day.

You see it was this way: Peter had gone over to the Green Forest very early that morning in the hope of getting breakfast in a certain swamp. He was hopping along, lipperty-lipperty-lip, with his thoughts chiefly on that breakfast he hoped to get, but at the same time with ears and eyes alert for possible danger, when a strange feeling swept over him. It was a feeling that great danger was very near, though he saw nothing and heard nothing to indicate it. It was just a feeling, that was all.

Now Peter has learned that the wise thing to do when one has such a feeling as that is to seek safety first and investigate afterwards. At the instant he felt that strange feeling of fear he was passing a certain big, hollow log. Without really knowing why he did it, because, you know, he didn't stop to do any thinking, he dived into that hollow log, and even as he did so there was the sharp swish of great wings. Terror the Goshawk had missed catching Peter by the fraction of a second.

With his heart thumping as if it were trying to pound its way through his ribs, Peter peeped out of that hollow log. Terror had alighted on a tall stump only a few feet away. To Peter in his fright he seemed the biggest bird he ever had seen. Of course he wasn't. Actually he was very near the same size as Redtail the Hawk, whom Peter knew well. He was handsome. There was no denying the fact that he was handsome.

His back was bluish. His head seemed almost black. Over and behind each eye was a white line. Underneath he was beautifully marked with wavy bars of gray and white. On his tail were four dark bands. Yes, he was handsome. But Peter had no thought for his beauty. He could see nothing but the fierceness of the eyes that were fixed on the entrance to that hollow log. Peter shivered as if with a cold chill. He knew that in Terror was no pity or gentleness.

"I hope," thought Peter, "that Mr. and Mrs. Grouse are nowhere about." You see he knew that there is no one that Terror would rather catch than a member of the Grouse family.

Terror did not sit on that stump long. He knew that Peter was not likely to come out in a hurry. Presently he flew away, and Peter suspected from the direction in which he was headed that Terror was going over to visit Farmer Brown's henyard. Of all the members of the Hawk family there is none more bold than Terror the Goshawk. He would not hesitate to seize a hen from almost beneath Farmer Brown's nose. He is well named, for the mere suspicion that he is anywhere about strikes terror to the heart of all the furred and feathered folks. He is so swift of wing that few can escape him, and he has no

pity, but kills for the mere love of killing. In this respect he is like Shadow the Weasel. To kill for food is forgiven by the little people of the Green Forest and the Green Meadows, but to kill needlessly is unpardonable. This is why Terror the Goshawk is universally hated and has not a single friend.

All that day Peter remained hidden in that hollow log. He did not dare put foot outside until the Black Shadows began to creep through the Green Forest. Then he knew that there was nothing more to fear from Terror the Goshawk, for he hunts only by day. Once more Peter's thoughts were chiefly of his stomach, for it was very, very empty.

But it was not intended that Peter should fill his stomach at once. He had gone but a little way when from just ahead of him the silence of the early evening was broken by a terrifying sound—"Whooo-hoo-hoo, whooo-hoo!" It was so sudden and there was in it such a note of fierceness that Peter had all he could do to keep from jumping and running for dear life. But he knew that voice and he knew, too, that safety lay in keeping perfectly still. So with his heart thumping madly, as when he had escaped from Terror that morning, Peter sat as still as if he could not move.

It was the hunting call of Hooty the Great Horned Owl, and it had been intended to frighten some one into jumping and running, or at least into moving ever so little. Peter knew all about that trick of Hooty's. He knew that in all the Green Forest there are no ears so wonderful as those of Hooty the Owl, and that the instant he had uttered that fierce hunting call he had strained those wonderful ears to catch the faintest sound which some startled little sleeper of the night might make. The rustle of a leaf would be enough to bring Hooty to the spot on his great silent wings, and then his fierce yellow eyes, which are made for seeing in the dusk, would find the victim.

So Peter sat still, fearful that the very thumping of his heart might reach those wonderful ears. Again that terrible hunting cry rang out, and again Peter had all he could do to keep from jumping. But he didn't jump, and a few minutes later, as he sat staring at a certain tall, dead stub of a tree, wondering just where Hooty was, the top of that stub seemed to break off, and a great, broad-winged bird flew away soundlessly like a drifting shadow. It was Hooty himself. Sitting perfectly straight on the top of that tall, dead stub he had seemed a part of it. Peter waited some time before he ventured to move. Finally he heard Hooty's hunting call in a distant part of the Green Forest, and knew that it was safe for him to once more think of his empty stomach.

Later in the winter while the snow still lay in the Green Forest, and the ice still bound the Laughing Brook, Peter made a surprising discovery. He was over in a certain lonely part of the Green Forest when he happened to remember that near there was an old nest which had once belonged to Redtail the Hawk. Out of idle curiosity Peter ran over for a look at that old nest. Imagine how surprised he was when just as he came within sight of it, he saw a great bird just settling down on it. Peter's heart jumped right up in his throat. At least that is the way it seemed, for he recognized Mrs. Hooty.

Of course Peter stopped right where he was and took the greatest care not to move or make a sound. Presently Hooty himself appeared and perched in a tree near at hand. Peter has seen Hooty many times before, but always as a great, drifting shadow in the moonlight. Now he could see him clearly. As he sat bolt upright he seemed to be of the same height as Terror the Goshawk, but with a very much bigger body. If Peter had but known it, his appearance of great size was largely due to the fluffy feathers in which Hooty was clothed. Like his small cousin, Spooky the Screech Owl, Hooty seemed to have no neck at all. He looked as if his great head was set directly on his shoulders. From each side of his head two great tufts of feathers stood out like ears or horns. His bill was sharply hooked. He was dressed wholly in reddish-brown with little buff and black markings, and on his throat was a white patch. His legs were feathered, and so were his feet clear to the great claws.

But it was on the great, round, fierce, yellow eyes that Peter kept his own eyes. He had always thought of Hooty as being able to see only in the dusk of evening or on moonlight nights, but somehow

he had a feeling that even now in broad daylight Hooty could see perfectly well, and he was quite right.

For a long time Peter sat there without moving. He dared not do anything else. After he had recovered from his first fright he began to wonder what Hooty and Mrs. Hooty were doing at that old nest. His curiosity was aroused. He felt that he simply must find out. By and by Hooty flew away very carefully, so as not to attract the attention of Mrs. Hooty. Peter stole back the way he had come.

When he was far enough away to feel reasonably safe, he scampered as fast as ever he could. He wanted to get away from that place, and he wanted to find some one of whom he could ask questions.

Presently he met his cousin, Jumper the Hare, and at once in a most excited manner told him all he had seen.

Jumper listened until Peter was through. "If you'll take my advice," said he, "you'll keep away from that part of the Green Forest, Cousin Peter. From what you tell me it is quite clear to me that the Hooties have begun nesting."

"Nesting!" exclaimed Peter. "Nesting! Why, gentle Mistress Spring will not get here for a month yet!"

"I said NESTING," retorted Jumper, speaking rather crossly, for you see he did not like to have his word doubted. "Hooty the Great Horned Owl doesn't wait for Mistress Spring. He and Mrs. Hooty believe in getting household cares out of the way early. Along about this time of year they hunt up an old nest of Redtail the Hawk or Blacky the Crow or Chatterer the Red Squirrel, for they do not take the trouble to build a nest themselves. Then Mrs. Hooty lays her eggs while there is still snow and ice. Why their youngsters don't catch their death from cold when they hatch out is more than I can say. But they don't. I'm sorry to hear that the Hooties have a nest here this year. It means a bad time for a lot of little folks in feathers and fur. I certainly shall keep away in from that part of the Green Forest, and I advise you to."

Peter said that he certainly should, and then started on for the dear Old Briar-patch to think things over. The discovery that already the nesting season of a new year had begun turned Peter's thoughts towards the coming of sweet Mistress Spring and the return of his many feathered friends who had left for the far-away South so long before. A great longing to hear the voices of Welcome Robin and Winsome Bluebird and Little Friend the Song Sparrow swept over him, and a still greater longing for a bit of friendly gossip with Jenny Wren. In the past year he had learned much about his feathered neighbors, but there were still many things he wanted to know, things which only Jenny Wren could tell him. He was only just beginning to find out that no one knows all there is to know, especially about the birds. And no one ever will.

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