

How Old King Eagle Won His White Head

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit sat on the edge of the dear Old Briar-patch, staring up into the sky with his head tipped back until it made his neck ache. Way, way up in the sky was a black speck sailing across the snowy white face of a cloud. It didn't seem possible that it could be alive way up there. But it was. Peter knew that it was, and he knew who it was. It was King Eagle. By and by it disappeared over towards the Great Mountain. Peter rubbed the back of his neck, which ached because he had tipped his head back so long. Then he gave a little sigh.

"I wonder what it seems like to be able to fly like that," said he out loud, a way he sometimes has.

"Are you envious?" asked a voice so close to him that Peter jumped. There was Sammy Jay sitting in a little tree just over his head.

"No!" snapped Peter, for it made him a wee bit cross to be so startled.

"No, I'm not envious, Sammy Jay. I'm not envious of any bird. The ground is good enough for me. I was just wondering, that's all."

"Have you ever seen King Eagle close to?" asked Sammy.

"Once," replied Peter. "Once he came down to the Green Meadows and sat in that lone tree over there, and I was squatting in a bunch of grass quite near and could see him very plainly. He is big and fierce-looking, but he looks his name, every inch a king. I've wondered a good many times since how it happens that he has a white head."

"Because," replied Sammy, "he is just what he looks to be,—king of the birds,—and that white head is the sign of his royalty given his great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather by Old Mother Nature, way back in the beginning of things."

Peter's eyes sparkled. "Tell me about it, Sammy," he begged. "Tell me about it, and I won't quarrel with you any more."

"All right, Peter. I'll tell you the story, because it will do you good to hear it. I supposed everybody knew it. All birds do. That is why we all look up to King Eagle," replied Sammy.

"Way back in the beginning of things, old King Bear ruled in the Green Forest, as you know. That is, he ruled the animals and all the little people who lived on the ground, but he didn't rule the birds. You see the birds were not willing to be ruled over by an animal. They wanted one of their own kind. So they refused to have old King Bear as their king and went to Old Mother Nature to ask her to appoint a king of the air. Now Mr. Eagle was one of the biggest and strongest and most respected of all the birds of the air. There were some, like Mr. Goose and Mr. Swan, who were bigger, but they spent most of their time on the water or the earth, and they had no great claws or hooked beak to command respect as did Mr. Eagle. So Old Mother Nature made Mr. Eagle king of the air, and as was quite right and proper, all the birds hastened to pay him homage.

"So King Eagle ruled the air and none dared to cross him or to disobey him. Unlike old King Bear, he accepted no tribute from his subjects but hunted for himself, and instead of growing fat and lazy, as did old King Bear, he grew stronger of wing and feared no one and nothing. Now this was in the days when the world was young, and Old Mother Nature was very busy trying to make the world a good place to live in, so she had very little time to look after the birds and the animals. Thus she left matters very much to King Eagle and old King Bear. They settled all the quarrels between their subjects, and for a while everything went smoothly.

"King Eagle made his home on the cliff of a mountain, so that he could look down on all below and see what was going on. Every day he went down to the Green Forest and sat on the tallest tree while he listened to the complaints of the other birds and settled their disputes, and none questioned his decisions. Now after a while, this little part of the earth where the animals and the birds first lived became overcrowded. It became harder and harder to get enough to eat. Quarrels became more frequent, until King Eagle had little time for anything but straightening out these troubles and trying to keep peace.

"Old Mother Nature had been away a long time trying to make other parts of the world fit to live in. No one knew when she was coming back or just where she was. King Eagle, sitting on the edge of the cliff on the mountain, thought it all over. Old Mother Nature ought to know how things were. He would send a messenger to try to find her. So the next day he called all the birds together and asked who would go out into the unknown Great World to look for Old Mother Nature and take a message to her.

"No one offered. This one had a family to look after. That one was not feeling well. Another had a pain in his wings. One and all they had an excuse until Hummer, the tiniest of all the birds, was reached. He darted into the air before King Eagle. 'I'll go,' said he.

"All the others laughed. The very idea of such a tiny fellow going out to dare the dangers of the unknown Great World seemed to them so absurd that they just had to laugh. But King Eagle didn't laugh. He thanked Hummer and told him that his heart was as big as his body was small, but that he would not send him out into the Great World, for he would go himself. He had been but trying out his subjects, and he had found but one who was worthy, and that one was the smallest of them all. Then King Eagle said things that made all the other birds hang their heads for shame and want to sneak out of sight.

"After that, he told them that no king who was worthy to be king would ask his subjects to do what he would not do himself, and that where there was danger to be faced or something hard to do, it was the king's place to do it, so he himself was going out into the unknown Great World to find Mother Nature and see what could be done to make things better and happier for them. Then he spread his great wings and sailed away, every inch a king. They watched him until he was a speck in the sky, and finally he disappeared altogether.

"Day after day they watched for him to come back, but there was no sign of him; they began to shake their heads and openly talk of choosing a new king. Only little Mr. Hummer kept his faith and day after day flew away in the direction old King Eagle had gone, hoping to meet him coming back. At last a day was set to choose a new king. That morning, as soon as it was light enough to see, little Mr. Hummer darted away, and his heart was heavy. He would take no part in choosing a new king. He would go until he found King Eagle or until something happened to him. Pretty soon he saw a speck

way up against a cloud, a speck no bigger than himself. It grew bigger and bigger, and at last he knew that it was King Eagle himself. Little Mr. Hummer turned and flew as he never had flown before. He wanted to get back before a new king was chosen, so that King Eagle might never know that his subjects had lost faith in him.

"He was so out of breath when he reached the other birds that he couldn't say a word for a few minutes. Then he told them that King Eagle was coming. The other birds had proved that they were not brave when they had refused to go out in search of Old Mother Nature, and now they proved it again. Instead of waiting to give King Eagle a royal welcome, they hurried away, one after another. They were afraid to meet him, because in their hearts they knew that they had done a cowardly thing in deciding to choose a new king. So when King Eagle, weary and with torn wings and broken tail feathers, dropped down to the tall tree in the Green Forest, there was none to give him greeting save little Mr. Hummer.

"King Eagle said nothing about the failure of the other birds to give him greeting but at once sent little Mr. Hummer around to tell all the others that far away he had found Old Mother Nature preparing a new land for them, and that when she gave the word, he would lead them to it. Then King Eagle flew to his home on the cliff of the mountain, and not one word did he ever say of his terrible journey, of how he had gone hungry, had been beaten by storms, and had suffered from cold and weariness, yet never once had turned back.

"But when Old Mother Nature came later and announced that the new land was ready for the birds, she first called them together and told them all that King Eagle had suffered, and how he had proved himself a royal king. As a reward she promised that his family should be rulers over the birds forever, and as a sign that this should be so, she reached forth and touched his black head, and it became snowy white, and all the birds cried 'Long live the king!'

"Then Old Mother Nature turned to tiny Mr. Hummer and touched his throat, and behold a shining ruby was there, the reward of loyalty, faith, and bravery.

"Then King Eagle mounted into the air and proudly led the way to the promised land. And so the birds went forth and peopled the Great World, and King Eagle and his children and his children's children have ruled the air ever since and have worn the snowy crown which King Eagle of long ago so bravely won."

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "How Old King Eagle Won His White Head." *Mother West Wind "How" Stories*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1916. 3 – 16. Electronic.