

Peter Learns Something About Spooky

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit likes winter. At least he doesn't mind it so very much, even though he has to really work for a living. Perhaps it is a good thing that he does, for he might grow too fat to keep out of the way of Reddy Fox. You see when the snow is deep Peter is forced to eat whatever he can, and very often there isn't much of anything for him but the bark of young trees. It is at such times that Peter gets into mischief, for there is no bark he likes better than that of young fruit trees. Now you know what happens when the bark is taken off all the way around the trunk of a tree. That tree dies. It dies for the simple reason that it is up the inner layer of bark that the life-giving sap travels in the spring and summer. Of course, when a strip of bark has been taken off all the way around near the base of a tree, the sap cannot go up and the tree must die.

Now up near the Old Orchard Farmer Brown had set out a young orchard. Peter knew all about that young orchard, for he had visited it many times in the summer. Then there had been plenty of sweet clover and other green things to eat, and Peter had never been so much as tempted to sample the bark of those young trees. But now things were very different, and it was very seldom that Peter knew what it was to have a full stomach. He kept thinking of that young orchard. He knew that if he were wise he would keep away from there. But the more he thought of it the more it seemed to him that he just must have some of that tender young bark. So just at dusk one evening, Peter started for the young orchard.

Peter got there in safety and his eyes sparkled as he hopped over to the nearest young tree. But when he reached it, Peter had a dreadful disappointment. All around the trunk of that young tree was wire netting. Peter couldn't get even a nibble of that bark. He tried the next tree with no better result. Then he hurried on from tree to tree, always with the same result. You see Farmer Brown knew all about Peter's liking for the bark of young fruit trees, and he had been wise enough to protect his young orchard.

At last Peter gave up and hopped over to the Old Orchard. As he passed a certain big tree he was startled by a voice. "What's the matter, Peter?" said the voice. "You don't look happy."

Peter stopped short and stared up in the big apple-tree. Look as he would he couldn't see anybody. Of course there wasn't a leaf on that tree, and he could see all through it. Peter blinked and felt foolish. He knew that had there been any one sitting on any one of those branches he couldn't have helped seeing him.

"Don't look so high, Peter; don't look so high," said the voice with a chuckle. This time it sounded as if it came right out of the trunk of the tree. Peter stared at the trunk and then suddenly laughed right out. Just a few feet above the ground was a good sized hole in the tree, and poking his head out of it was a funny little fellow with big eyes and a hooked beak.

"You certainly did fool me that time, Spooky," cried Peter. "I ought to have recognized your voice, but I didn't."

Spooky the Screech Owl, for that is who it was, came out of the hole in the tree and without a sound from his wings flew over and perched just above Peter's head. He was a little fellow, not over

eight inches high, but there was no mistaking the family to which he belonged. In fact he looked very much like a small copy of Hooty the Great Horned Owl, so much so that Peter felt a little cold shiver run over him, although he had nothing in the world to fear from Spooky.

His head seemed to be almost as big around as his body, and he seemed to leave no neck at all. He was dressed in bright reddish-brown, with little streaks and bars of black. Underneath he was whitish, with little streaks and bars of black and brown. On each side of his head was a tuft of feathers. They looked like ears and some people think they are ears, which is a mistake. His eyes were round and yellow with a fierce hungry look in them. His bill was small and almost hidden among the feathers of his face, but it was hooked just like the bill of Hooty. As he settled himself he turned his head around until he could look squarely behind him, then brought it back again so quickly that to Peter it looked as if it had gone clear around. You see Spooky's eyes are fixed in their sockets and he cannot move them from side to side. He has to turn his whole head in order to see to one side or the other.

"You haven't told me yet why you look so unhappy, Peter," said Spooky.

"Isn't an empty stomach enough to make any fellow unhappy?" retorted Peter rather shortly.

Spooky chuckled. "I've got an empty stomach myself, Peter," said he, "but it isn't making me unhappy. I have a feeling that somewhere there is a fat Mouse waiting for me."

Just then Peter remembered what Jenny Wren had told him early in the spring of how Spooky the Screech Owl lives all the year around in a hollow tree, and curiosity made him forget for the time being that he was hungry. "Did you live in that hole all summer, Spooky?" he asked.

Spooky nodded solemnly. "I've lived in that hollow summer and winter for three years," said he.

Peter's eyes opened very wide. "And till now I never even guessed it," he exclaimed. "Did you raise a family there?"

"I certainly did," replied Spooky. "Mrs. Spooky and I raised a family of four as fine looking youngsters as you ever have seen. They've gone out into the Great World to make their own living now. Two were dressed just like me and two were gray."

"What's that?" exclaimed Peter.

"I said that two were dressed just like me and two were gray," replied Spooky rather sharply.

"That's funny," Peter exclaimed.

"What's funny?" snapped Spooky rather crossly.

"Why that all four were not dressed alike," said Peter.

"There's nothing funny about it," retorted Spooky, and snapped his bill sharply with a little cracking sound. "We Screech Owls believe in variety. Some of us are gray and some of us are reddish-brown. It is a case of where you cannot tell a person just by the color of his clothes."

Peter nodded as if he quite understood, although he couldn't understand at all. "I'm ever so

pleased to find you living here,” said he politely. “You see, in winter the Old Orchard is rather a lonely place. I don't see how you get enough to eat when there are so few birds about.”

“Birds!” snapped Spooky. “What have birds to do with it?”

“Why, don't you live on birds?” asked Peter innocently.

“I should say not. I guess I would starve if I depended on birds for my daily food,” retorted Spooky. “I catch a Sparrow now and then, to be sure, but usually it is an English Sparrow, and I consider that I am doing the Old Orchard a good turn every time I am lucky enough to catch one of the family of Bully the English Sparrow. But I live mostly on Mice and Shrews in winter and in summer I eat a lot of grasshoppers and other insects. If it wasn't for me and my relatives I guess Mice would soon overrun the Great World. Farmer Brown ought to be glad I've come to live in the Old Orchard and I guess he is, for Farmer Brown's boy knows all about this house of mine and never disturbs me. Now if you'll excuse me I think I'll fly over to Farmer Brown's young orchard. I ought to find a fat Mouse or two trying to get some of the bark from those young trees.”

“Huh!” exclaimed Peter. “They can try all they want to, but they won't get any; I can tell you that.”

Spooky's round yellow eyes twinkled. “It must be you have been trying to get some of that bark yourself,” said he.

Peter didn't say anything but he looked guilty, and Spooky once more chuckled as he spread his wings and flew away so soundlessly that he seemed more like a drifting shadow than a bird. Then Peter started for a certain swamp he knew of where he would be sure to find enough bark to stay his appetite.

Source:

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