

## Peter Gets a Lamé Neck

by Thornton W. Burgess

For several days it seemed to Peter Rabbit that everywhere he went he found members of the Warbler family. Being anxious to know all of them he did his best to remember how each one looked, but there were so many and some of them were dressed so nearly alike that after awhile Peter became so mixed that he gave it up as a bad job. Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, the Warblers disappeared. That is to say, most of them disappeared. You see they had only stopped for a visit, being on their way farther north.

In his interest in the affairs of others of his feathered friends, Peter had quite forgotten the Warblers. Then one day when he was in the Green Forest where the spruce-trees grow, he stopped to rest. This particular part of the Green Forest was low and damp, and on many of the trees gray moss grew, hanging down from the branches and making the trees look much older than they really were. Peter was staring at a hanging branch of this moss without thinking anything about it when suddenly a little bird alighted on it and disappeared in it. At least, that is what Peter thought. But it was all so unexpected that he couldn't be sure his eyes hadn't fooled him.

Of course, right away he became very much interested in that bunch of moss. He stared at it very hard. At first it looked no different from a dozen other bunches of moss, but presently he noticed that it was a little thicker than other bunches, as if somehow it had been woven together. He hopped off to one side so he could see better. It looked as if in one side of that bunch of moss was a little round hole. Peter blinked and looked very hard indeed to make sure. A minute later there was no doubt at all, for a little feathered head was poked out and a second later a dainty mite of a bird flew out and alighted very close to Peter. It was one of the smaller members of the Warbler family.

"Sprite!" cried Peter joyously. "I missed you when your cousins passed through here, and I thought you had gone to the Far North with the rest of them."

"Well, I haven't, and what's more I'm not going to go on to the Far North. I'm going to stay right here," declared Sprite the Parula Warbler, for that is who it was.

As Peter looked at Sprite he couldn't help thinking that there wasn't a daintier member in the whole Warbler family. His coat was of a soft bluish color with a yellowish patch in the very center of his back. Across each wing were two bars of white. His throat was yellow. Just beneath it was a little band of bluish-black. His breast was yellow and his sides were grayish and brownish-chestnut.

"Sprite, you're just beautiful," declared Peter in frank admiration. "What was the reason I didn't see you up in the Old Orchard with your cousins?"

"Because I wasn't there," was Sprite's prompt reply as he flitted about, quite unable to sit still a minute. "I wasn't there because I like the Green Forest better, so I came straight here."

"What were you doing just now in that bunch of moss?" demanded Peter, a sudden suspicion of the truth hopping into his head.

"Just looking it over," replied Sprite, trying to look innocent.

At that very instant Peter looked up just in time to see a tail disappearing in the little round hole in the side of the bunch of moss. He knew that that tail belonged to Mrs. Sprite, and just that glimpse told him all he wanted to know.

“You've got a nest in there!” Peter exclaimed excitedly. “There's no use denying it, Sprite; you've got a nest in there! What a perfectly lovely place for a nest.”

Sprite saw at once that it would be quite useless to try to deceive Peter. “Yes,” said he, “Mrs. Sprite and I have a nest in there. We've just finished it. I think myself it is rather nice. We always build in moss like this. All we have to do is to find a nice thick bunch and then weave it together at the bottom and line the inside with fine grasses. It looks so much like all the rest of the bunches of moss that it is seldom any one finds it. I wouldn't trade nests with anybody I know.”

“Isn't it rather lonesome over here by yourselves?” asked Peter.

“Not at all,” replied Sprite. “You see, we are not as much alone as you think. My cousin, Fidget the Myrtle Warbler, is nesting not very far away, and another cousin Weechi the Magnolia Warbler is also quite near. Both have begun housekeeping already.”

Of course Peter was all excitement and interest at once. “Where are their homes?” he asked eagerly. “Tell me where they are and I'll go straight over and call.”

“Peter,” said Sprite severely, “you ought to know better than to ask me to tell you anything of this kind. You have been around enough to know that there is no secret so precious as the secret of a home. You happened to find mine, and I guess I can trust you not to tell anybody where it is. If you can find the homes of Fidget and Weechi, all right, but I certainly don't intend to tell you where they are.”

Peter knew that Sprite was quite right in refusing to tell the secrets of his cousins, but he couldn't think of going home without at least looking for those homes. He tried to look very innocent as he asked if they also were in hanging bunches of moss. But Sprite was too smart to be fooled and Peter learned nothing at all.

For some time Peter hopped around this way and that way, thinking every bunch of moss he saw must surely contain a nest. But though he looked and looked and looked, not another little round hole did he find, and there were so many bunches of moss that finally his neck ached from tipping his head back so much. Now Peter hasn't much patience as he might have, so after a while he gave up the search and started on his way home. On higher ground, just above the low swampy place where grew the moss-covered trees, he came to a lot of young hemlock-trees. These had no moss on them. Having given up his search Peter was thinking of other things when there flitted across in front of him a black and gray bird with a yellow cap, yellow sides, and a yellow patch at the root of his tail. Those yellow patches were all Peter needed to see to recognize Fidget the Myrtle Warbler, one of the two friends he had been so long looking for down among the moss-covered trees.

“Oh, Fidget!” cried Peter, hurrying after the restless little bird. “Oh, Fidget! I've been looking everywhere for you.”

“Well, here I am,” retorted Fidget. “You didn't look everywhere or you would have found me before. What can I do for you?” All the time Fidget was hopping and flitting about, never still an

instant.

“You can tell me where your nest is,” replied Peter promptly.

“I can, but I won't,” retorted Fidget. “Now honestly, Peter, do you think you have any business to ask such a question?”

Peter hung his head and then replied quite honestly, “No I don't, Fidget. But you see Sprite told me that you had a nest not very far from his and I've looked at bunches of moss until I've got a crick in the back of my neck.”

“Bunches of moss!” exclaimed Fidget. “What under the sun do you think I have to do with bunches of moss?”

“Why—why—I just thought you probably had your nest in one, the same as your cousin Sprite.”

Fidget laughed right out. “I'm afraid you would have a worse crick in the back of your neck than you've got now before ever you found my nest in a bunch of moss,” said he. “Moss may suit my cousin Sprite, but it doesn't suit me at all. Besides, I don't like those dark places where the moss grows on the trees. I build my nest of twigs and grass and weed-stalks and I line it with hair and rootlets and feathers. Sometimes I bind it together with spider silk, and if you really want to know, I like a little hemlock-tree to put it in. It isn't very far from here, but where it is I'm not going to tell you. Have you seen my cousin, Weechi?”

“No,” replied Peter. “Is he anywhere around here?”

“Right here,” replied another voice and Weechi the Magnolia Warbler dropped down on the ground for just a second right in front of Peter.

The top of his head and the back of his neck were gray. Above his eye was a white stripe and his cheeks were black. His throat was clear yellow, just below which was a black band. From this black streaks ran down across his yellow breast. At the root of his tail he was yellow. His tail was mostly black on top and white underneath.

His wings were black and gray with two white bars. He was a little smaller than Fidget the Myrtle Warbler and quite as restless.

Peter fairly itched to ask Weechi where his nest was, but by this time he had learned a lesson, so wisely kept his tongue still.

“What were you fellows talking about?” asked Weechi.

“Nests,” replied Fidget. “I've just been telling Peter that while Cousin Sprite may like to build in that hanging moss down there, it wouldn't suit me at all.”

“Nor me either,” declared Weechi promptly. “I prefer to build a real nest just as you do. By the way, Fidget, I stopped to look at your nest this morning. I find we build a good deal alike and we like the same sort of a place to put it. I suppose you know that I am a rather near neighbor of yours?”

“Of course I know it,” replied Fidget. “In fact I watched you start your nest. Don't you think you have it rather near the ground?”

“Not too near, Fidget; not too near. I am not as high-minded as some people. I like to be within two or three feet of the ground.”

“I do myself,” replied Fidget.

Fidget and Weechi became so interested in discussing nests and the proper way of building them they quite forgot Peter Rabbit. Peter sat around for a while listening, but being more interested in seeing those nests than hearing about them, he finally stole away to look for them.

He looked and looked, but there were so many young hemlock-trees and they looked so much alike that finally Peter lost patience and gave it up as a bad job.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. “Peter Gets a Lame Neck.” *The Burgess Bird Book for Children*. Electronic.