

A Fishing Party

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit sat on the edge of the Old Briar-patch trying to make up his mind whether to stay at home, which was the wise and proper thing to do, or to go call on some of the friends he had not yet visited. A sharp, harsh rattle caused him to look up to see a bird about a third larger than Welcome Robin, and with a head out of all proportion to the size of his body. He was flying straight towards the Smiling Pool, rattling harshly as he flew. The mere sound of his voice settled the matter for Peter. "It's Rattles the Kingfisher," he cried. "I think I'll run over to the Smiling Pool and pay him my respects."

So Peter started for the Smiling Pool as fast as his long legs could take him, lipperty-lipperty-lip. He had lost sight of Rattles the Kingfisher, and when he reached the back of the Smiling Pool he was in doubt which way to turn. It was very early in the morning and there was not so much as a ripple on the surface of the Smiling Pool. As Peter sat there trying to make up his mind which way to go, he saw coming from the direction of the Big River a great, broad-winged bird, flying slowly. He seemed to have no neck at all, but carried straight out behind him were two long legs.

"Longlegs the Great Blue Heron! I wonder if he is coming here," exclaimed Peter. "I do hope so."

Peter stayed right where he was and waited. Nearer and nearer came Longlegs. When he was right opposite Peter he suddenly dropped his long legs, folded his great wings, and alighted right on the edge of the Smiling Pool across from where Peter was sitting. If he seemed to have no neck at all when he was flying, now he seemed to be all neck as he stretched it to its full length. The fact is, his neck was so long that when he was flying he carried it folded back on his shoulders. Never before had Peter had such an opportunity to see Longlegs.

He stood quite four feet high. The top of his head and throat were white. From the base of his great bill and over his eye was a black stripe which ended in two long, slender, black feathers hanging from the back of his head. His bill was longer than his head, stout and sharp like a spear and yellow in color. His long neck was a light brownish-gray. His back and wings were of a bluish color. The bend of each wing and the feathered parts of his legs were a rusty-red. The remainder of his legs and his feet were black. Hanging down over his breast were beautiful long pearly-gray feathers quite unlike any Peter had seen on any of his other feathered friends. In spite of the length of his legs and the length of his neck he was both graceful and handsome.

"I wonder what has brought him over to the Smiling Pool," thought Peter.

He didn't have to wait long to find out. After standing perfectly still with his neck stretched to its full height until he was sure that no danger was near, Longlegs waded into the water a few steps, folded his neck back on his shoulders until his long bill seemed to rest on his breast, and then remained as motionless as if there were no life in him. Peter also sat perfectly still. By and by he began to wonder if Longlegs had gone to sleep. His own patience was reaching an end and he was just about to go on in search of Rattles the Kingfisher when like a flash the dagger-like bill of Longlegs shot out and down into the water. When he withdrew it Peter saw that Longlegs had caught a little fish which he at once proceeded to swallow head-first. Peter almost laughed right out as he watched the funny efforts of Longlegs to gulp that fish down his long throat. Then Longlegs resumed his old position as motionless

as before.

It was no trouble now for Peter to sit still, for he was too interested in watching this lone fisherman to think of leaving. It wasn't long before Longlegs made another catch and this time it was a fat Pollywog. Peter thought of how he had watched Plunger the Osprey fishing in the Big River and the difference in the ways of the two fishermen.

“Plunger hunts for his fish while Longlegs waits for his fish to come to him,” thought Peter. “I wonder if Longlegs never goes hunting.”

As if in answer to Peter's thought Longlegs seemed to conclude that no more fish were coming his way. He stretched himself up to his full height, looked sharply this way and that way to make sure that all was safe, then began to walk along the edge of the Smiling Pool. He put each foot down slowly and carefully so as to make no noise. He had gone but a few steps when that great bill darted down like a flash, and Peter saw that he had caught a careless young Frog. A few steps farther on he caught another Pollywog. Then coming to a spot that suited him, he once more waded in and began to watch for fish.

Peter was suddenly reminded of Rattles the Kingfisher, whom he had quite forgotten. From the Big Hickory-tree on the bank, Rattles flew out over the Smiling Pool, hovered for an instant, then plunged down head-first. There was a splash, and a second later Rattles was in the air again, shaking the water from him in a silver spray. In his long, stout, black bill was a little fish. He flew back to a branch of the Big Hickory-tree that hung out over the water and thumped the fish against the branch until it was dead. Then he turned it about so he could swallow it head-first. It was a big fish for the size of the fisherman and he had a dreadful time getting it down. But at last it was down, and Rattles set himself to watch for another. The sun shone full on him, and Peter gave a little gasp of surprise.

“I never knew before how handsome Rattles is,” thought Peter. He was about the size of Yellow Wing the Flicker, but his head made him look bigger than he really was. You see, the feathers on top of his head stood up in a crest, as if they had been brushed the wrong way. His head, back, wings and tail were a bluish-gray. His throat was white and he wore a white collar. In front of each eye was a little white spot. Across his breast was a belt of bluish-gray, and underneath he was white. There were tiny spots of white on his wings, and his tail was spotted with white. His bill was black and, like that of Longlegs, was long, and stout, and sharp. It looked almost too big for his size.

Presently Rattles flew out and plunged into the Smiling Pool again, this time, very near to where Longlegs was patiently waiting. He caught a fish, for it is not often that Rattles misses. It was smaller than the first one Peter had seen him catch, and this time as soon as he got back to the Big Hickory-tree, he swallowed it without thumping it against the branch. As for Longlegs, he looked thoroughly put out. For a moment or two he stood glaring angrily up at Rattles. You see, when Rattles had plunged so close to Longlegs he had frightened all the fish. Finally Longlegs seemed to make up his mind that there was room for but one fisherman at a time at the Smiling Pool. Spreading his great wings, folding his long neck back on his shoulders, and dragging his long legs out behind him, he flew heavily away in the direction of the Big River.

Rattles remained long enough to catch another little fish, and then with a harsh rattle flew off down the Laughing Brook. “I would know him anywhere by that rattle,” thought Peter. “There isn't any one who can make a noise anything like it. I wonder where he has gone to now. He must have a nest, but I haven't the least idea what kind of a nest he builds. Hello! There's Grandfather Frog over on his

green lily pad. Perhaps he can tell me.”

So Peter hopped along until he was near enough to talk to Grandfather Frog. “What kind of a nest does Rattles the Kingfisher build?” repeated Grandfather Frog. “Chug-arum, Peter Rabbit! I thought everybody knew that Rattles doesn't build a nest. At least I wouldn't call it a nest. He lives in a hole in the ground.”

“What!” cried Peter, and looked as if he couldn't believe his own ears.

Grandfather Frog grinned and his goggly eyes twinkled. “Yes,” said he, “Rattles lives in a hole in the ground.”

“But—but—but what kind of a hole?” stammered Peter.

“Just plain hole,” retorted Grandfather Frog, grinning more broadly than ever. Then seeing how perplexed and puzzled Peter looked, he went on to explain. “He usually picks out a high gravelly bank close to the water and digs a hole straight in just a little way from the top. He makes it just big enough for himself and Mrs. Rattles to go in and out of comfortably, and he digs it straight in for several feet. I'm told that at the end of it he makes a sort of bedroom, because he usually has a good-sized family.”

“Do you mean to say that he digs it himself?” asked Peter.

Grandfather Frog nodded. “If he doesn't, Mrs. Kingfisher does,” he replied. “Those big bills of theirs are picks as well as fish spears. They loosen the sand with those and scoop it out with their feet. I've never seen the inside of their home myself, but I'm told that their bedroom is lined with fish bones. Perhaps you may call that a nest, but I don't.”

“I'm going straight down the Laughing Brook to look for that hole,” declared Peter, and left in such a hurry that he forgot to be polite enough to say thank you to Grandfather Frog.

Source:

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