

When Mr. Kingfisher Took to the Ground

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit had taken it into his funny little head to wander down the Laughing Brook below the Smiling Pool. It was open there, and in one place the bank was quite high and steep. Peter sat down on the edge of it and looked down. Right under him the Laughing Brook was very quiet and clear. Peter sat gazing down into it. He could see all the pebbles on the bottom and queer little plants growing among them. It seemed very queer, very queer indeed to Peter that plants, real plants, could be growing down there under water. Somehow he couldn't make it seem right that anything but fish should be able to live down there.

So Peter sat gazing down, lost in a sort of day-dream. The Jolly Little Sunbeams made beautiful lights and shadows in the water. Everything was so peaceful and beautiful that Peter quite forgot he was sitting right out in the open where Redtail the Hawk might spy him. He just gave himself up to dreams, day-dreams, you know. Presently those day-dreams were very, very near to being sleep-dreams. Yes, Sir, they were. Peter actually was nodding. His big eyes would close, open, close again, open and then close for a little longer. Suddenly a sharp and very loud noise, which seemed to come from right under his very toes, put an end to all nodding and dreaming. It was a long, harsh rattle, and it startled Peter so that he almost jumped out of his skin. Anyway, he jumped straight up in the air, and the wonder was that he didn't tumble headfirst down that steep bank right into the Laughing Brook. A queer prickly feeling ran all over him. He blinked his eyes rapidly. Then he saw a handsome blue and white and gray bird, with a head that looked too big for his body, flying up the Laughing Brook just above the water, and as he flew he made that sharp, harsh, rattling noise which had startled Peter so. Abruptly he paused in his flight, hovered over the water an instant, shot down, and disappeared with a tinkling little splash. A second later he was in the air again, and in his stout, spear-like bill was a gleaming, silvery thing. It was a little fish, a minnow.

"Rattles the Kingfisher!" exclaimed Peter, as he watched him fly over to a tree, pound the fish on a branch, and then go through the funniest performance as he tried to swallow the minnow whole. "Now where did he come from?" continued Peter. "It certainly seemed to me that he came from right under my very feet, but there isn't so much as a twig down there."

Peter poked his head over the edge of the bank. No, there wasn't a single thing down there on which Rattles could have been sitting. He was still wondering about it when his wobbly little nose caught a smell, a very unpleasant smell. It was the smell of fish, and it seemed to come from right under him. He leaned a little farther over the edge of the bank, and then he gave a funny little gasp. There was a *hole* in the bank only a few inches below him, and the smell certainly came from that hole.

Could it be, could it possibly be that Rattles had come out of that hole? It certainly seemed so, and yet Peter couldn't quite believe it. The very idea of a bird living in a hole in the ground!

"I don't believe it! I don't, so there!" exclaimed Peter right out loud.

"What is it you don't believe?" asked a voice. Peter looked down. There was Little Joe Otter looking up at him from the water, his eyes twinkling.

"I don't believe that Rattles the Kingfisher came out of that hole, yet I don't see where else he

could have come from,” replied Peter.

Little Joe chuckled. “That's where he came from, even if you don't believe it,” said he. “I don't suppose you will believe that he dug that hole himself, either.”

Peter's eyes opened very wide. “I—I'll believe it if you say on your honor that it really is so,” he replied slowly.

“On my honor it really is so,” said Little Joe Otter, his eyes twinkling more than ever. “Perhaps you would like to know how the great-great-grandfather of Rattles the Kingfisher happened to take the ground for a home.”

Peter's eyes fairly danced. “Do tell me, Little Joe! Oh, please tell me!” he exclaimed.

Little Joe climbed out of the water on a rock just below Peter and settled himself comfortably.

“Once upon a time,” he began.

“In the beginning of things,” prompted Peter.

“Yes, in the beginning of things,” replied Little Joe, “way back when the world was young, lived the very first of the Kingfisher family. From the very beginning Mr. Kingfisher was a very independent fellow. He cared nothing about his neighbors. That is, he was not social. He was polite enough, but he preferred his own company and was never happier than when he was by himself. Of course, his neighbors soon found this out. They called him odd and queer, and soon refused to even speak to him. This just suited Mr. Kingfisher, and he went about his business very well content to be let alone. He spent his days fishing, and, because there were few other fishermen, he always had plenty to eat. At night he found a comfortable roost in a tree, and so for a time he was perfectly contented.

“By and by he discovered that most of his neighbors were building homes. At first he gave little attention to this, but after a while, seeing how happy they were, he began to think about a home for himself. The more he thought about it, the more he wanted one. But underneath Mr. Kingfisher's pointed cap were very clever wits. He would do nothing hastily. So he flew up and down the brook, appearing to do nothing but fish, but all the time he was keeping his eyes open, and there were no sharper eyes than those of Mr. Kingfisher.

“He was watching his neighbors work to see where and how they made their homes. He saw some of the birds building nests in the trees, some building them in the bushes, and a few building right on the ground.

“Of all he saw he liked best the home of Drummer the Woodpecker. 'That fellow has the right idea,' thought he. 'He cuts a hole in a tree; he is dry; he is warm; and no one can get at him there. If I build a home, that is the kind of place I want. He has got what I call plain sense, plain common sense!'

“After this Mr. Kingfisher watched until he was quite sure that no one was around to see him, and then he tried to make a hole in a tree as he had seen Drummer the Woodpecker do. But right away he discovered that two things were wrong; his bill was not made for cutting wood, and his feet were not big enough or the right shape for clinging to the side of a tree. Mr. Kingfisher was disappointed, very much disappointed. A hole seemed to him the only kind of a place for a home. He was thinking it over

when he happened to discover Mr. Muskrat digging a hole in the bank. At first he didn't pay much attention. Then all in a flash an idea, a wonderful idea, came to him. Why shouldn't he have a home in the ground? No one in the wide world would ever think of looking for the home of a bird in the ground. With a rattle of joy, Mr. Kingfisher flew off up the brook to a steep, sandy bank of which he knew.

“Just the place! Just the very place!” he cried. ‘I’ll make a hole just a little way from the top. No one will see it except from below, and it will be hard work for any one to climb up that sandy bank.’

“He flew straight at the spot he had selected and drove his big spear-like bill into it. Then he did it again and again. That bill wouldn't cut wood like the bill of Drummer the Woodpecker, but it certainly would cut into a sandy bank. In a little while he had room to cling with his feet. Then he could work faster and more easily. Pretty soon he had a hole deep enough to get into. He would loosen the earth with his bill and scrape it out with his feet. He was so pleased with his discovery that he kept right on working. He almost forgot to eat. All the time he could spare from fishing, he spent digging. Day after day he worked. When he had a hole three or four feet straight into the bank, he made a turn in it and then kept on digging. When he had gone far enough in, he made a little bedroom.

“At last the house was done. Mr. Kingfisher chuckled happily. No one could get at him there. He had the best and safest home he knew of. It was better than the home of Drummer the Woodpecker. If Mr. Mink happened to find it, and Mr. Kingfisher could think of no one else who would be likely to, there would be nothing to fear, for Mr. Mink would never dare face that sharp hill in such a narrow place.

“It all worked out just as Mr. Kingfisher thought it would. No one dreamed of looking in the ground for his home, and for a long, long time he kept his secret so well that his neighbors thought he had no home, and called him ‘Rattles the Homeless.’ From that day to this the Kingfishers have made their homes in the ground,” concluded Little Joe Otter.

“Isn't it wonderful?” exclaimed Peter, as he watched Rattles dive into the water and catch a silvery minnow. “I didn't know that any one wearing feathers had so much sense.”

“There's a great deal you don't know, Peter,” replied Little Joe Otter, sliding into the water.

Source:

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