

WHERE OLD MR. GOBLER GOT THE STRUTTING HABIT

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Peter Rabbit never will forget the first time he saw Big Tom Gobbler. It was very early one spring morning, when Peter was not yet old enough to have made the acquaintance of all the people who live in the Green Forest, and when it seemed as if the chief thing in life with him was to satisfy his curiosity about the ways of the Great World. Several times when he had been hopping along, lipperty-lipperty-lip, through the Green Forest just after sun-up, he had heard a strange sound quite unlike any other of all the many sounds his long ears had learned to know. He knew that it was the voice of some one who lived in the Green Forest, but though he had looked and looked he had been unable to discover the owner of that voice.

On this particular morning Peter happened to be sitting under some ferns on the edge of a little open space among the trees when again he heard that strange voice. It seemed to come from somewhere back in the woods in the very direction from which he had just come. "Gobble-obble-obble!" said the voice, and again a moment later "Gobble-obble-obble!"

Peter was just preparing to go back to see if he could find the owner of that voice when the noise of great wings caused him to look up just in time to see a bigger bird than he ever had even dreamed of coming swiftly over the tree-tops. With his eyes popping out and his mouth wide open with astonishment, Peter saw the great bird set its wings and sail down into the little opening on the edge of which Peter was sitting. The instant this great bird was on the ground, he stood as still as if he were made of stone, his long neck stretched up. Only the shine of a pair of the sharpest eyes Peter ever had seen showed that he was alive.

Peter held his breath, and it was so still that you could have heard a leaf drop had you been there. When at last the stranger moved, it was his head only. He turned it suddenly to the right and a moment later to the left. It was plain that he was listening for suspicious sounds. All the time his bright eyes searched the edge of the opening until Peter, although he was well hidden, felt that he must be seen. At last, satisfied that all was safe, the stranger drew in his neck and began to walk about, pecking at the ground here and there and swallowing what he picked up, though what it was Peter couldn't tell.

A sound seemed to catch the stranger's quick ears, for he stopped and stared very hard at a little clump of brush. Peter stared at it too. At first he saw nothing, but presently he saw a head poked out, and this also was a stranger. Peter glanced at the big stranger in the opening, and for a minute he wondered if it could be that something was wrong with his eyes. Never had he seen such a change in anybody. This stranger didn't look like the same bird at all. He was swelled up until Peter was afraid he would burst. His tail was spread out like a great fan. His head was laid back on his humped shoulders. His wings were dropped until the stiffly spread feathers brushed the ground. His head and neck were as red as blood, and there were no feathers on either. All the feathers of his body were ruffed out so that the sun shone on them and made them shimmer and shine in colors that seemed to constantly change.

Back and forth in front of the brush from which the other stranger was peeping very shyly this great bird strutted. He would stand still so that the sun would fall full on his shining coat and show it off to the best advantage, and at the same time he would draw in a great deal of air and then puff it out all at once. Then he would walk a few steps, turn, drag his wings on the ground to make them rustle, wheel, and run a few steps. Never had Peter seen such vanity, such conceit, such imposing, puffed-up pride. He watched until he grew tired, and then he stole away and hurried over to the Smiling Pool to tell Grandfather Frog all about it and ask who these strangers were.

"Chug-a-rum!" exclaimed Grandfather Frog, opening his big mouth very wide to laugh at Peter and his

excitement. "That was Big Tom Gobbler, and he was doing all that for the benefit of Mrs. Gobbler, who was hiding in that brush. It was her head you saw. Big Tom is the most conceited fellow in the Green Forest. He dearly loves to strut. He is just like his father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather. The Gobblers never have gotten over strutting since Old Mr. Gobbler, the first of the family, got the habit."

"Tell me about it. Please, Grandfather Frog, tell me about it," begged Peter. "How did Old Mr. Gobbler get the habit?"

Grandfather Frog chuckled. "He got it from admiring his own reflection in a pool of water," said he. "You see, in those days way back when the world was young, people had more time to form habits than they do now. With plenty to eat and little to do, they had more time to think about themselves than they do now. Old Mr. Gobbler soon discovered that he was the biggest of all the birds in that part of the Great World where he lived, and this discovery was, I suspect, the beginning of his vanity. Then one day as he was walking along, he came to a little pool of water. It was very clear, and there wasn't a ripple on the surface. There for the first time Mr. Gobbler saw his reflection. The more he looked, the better he liked his own appearance. He spread his tail just to see how it would look in the water. Then he puffed himself out and strutted.

"'There is nobody to compare with me,' thought he, and strutted more than ever.

"After that he used to steal away every day to admire himself in that little pool of water. He tried new ways of strutting and of puffing himself out. After a while he was no longer content to admire himself. He wanted others to admire him. So the first chance he got he began to strut and show off all his grand airs before Mrs. Gobbler. At first she paid no attention to him. At least that is the way she appeared. She would turn her back on him and walk off into the bushes. This made Old Mr. Gobbler very angry until he discovered that she would tiptoe back and watch him admiringly when she thought he didn't know it. That made him strut all the more.

"At first all the neighbors used to gather around and admire him and tell him how handsome he was until his head was quite turned, as the saying is, and he spent most of his time strutting and showing off. Then he took to bragging and boasting that there was no bird to compare with him. Thus he became quite unbearable, and all his neighbors would turn their backs on him when they saw him coming. Only Mrs. Gobbler continued to watch in secret and to admire him.

"Now in those days Mr. Gobbler didn't have a red head and neck. One day Old Mother Nature happened along when Mr. Gobbler was strutting and boasting how big and brave he was. He didn't see her, and she watched him quietly for a few minutes. Then she slipped away and hunted up Mr. Wolf.

"'I want you to steal over where Mr. Gobbler is strutting,' said she, 'and suddenly spring out at him as if you intended to catch him.'

"Mr. Wolf grinned and trotted off to do her bidding. He found Mr. Gobbler swelled up until he looked as if he must burst, and bragging to Mrs. Gobbler.

"'I'm the biggest of all the birds,' bragged Mr. Gobbler. 'I'm afraid of no one. While you have me with you, my dear, you have nothing in all the Great World to fear.'

"Just then out sprang Mr. Wolf with all his long, sharp teeth showing. Mr. Gobbler gave a yelp of fright. He lost his swelled-up appearance as suddenly as a bubble flattens out when it is pricked. With a frantic beating of his wings he took to the air. Being in such a fright, he didn't see where he was going, and struck his head against a sharp twig, which tore the skin, for there were no feathers to protect it, and made it bleed. The blood ran all over his head and down his neck, though he really was hardly hurt at all. From the top of a tall tree he looked down. There stood Old Mother Nature, looking up at him.

"Mr. Gobbler,' said she, 'you have acquired a bad habit, a very bad habit. Hereafter, whenever you become vain and strut, your head and neck shall become as red as they now are, as a reminder to you and all who see you of how silly it is to be vain and boastful.'

"And so it was. And so it is with Big Tom Gobbler to this day. There is nothing in the world more foolish than vanity," concluded Grandfather Frog.

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