

Some Feathered Diggers

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit scampered along down one bank of the Laughing Brook, eagerly watching for a high, gravelly bank such as Grandfather Frog had said that Rattles the Kingfisher likes to make his home in. If Peter had stopped to do a little thinking, he would have known that he was simply wasting time. You see, the Laughing Brook was flowing through the Green Meadows, so of course there would be no high, gravelly bank, because the Green Meadows are low. But Peter Rabbit, in his usual heedless way, did no thinking. He had seen Rattles fly down the Laughing Brook, and so he had just taken it for granted that the home of Rattles must be somewhere down there.

At last Peter reached the place where the Laughing Brook entered the Big River. Of course he hadn't found the home of Rattles. But now he did find something that for the time being made him quite forget Rattles and his home. Just before it reached the Big River the Laughing Brook wound through a swamp in which were many tall trees and a great number of young trees. A great many big ferns grew there and were splendid to hide under. Peter always did like that swamp.

He had stopped to rest in a clump of ferns when he was startled by seeing a great bird alight in a tree just a little way from him. His first thought was that it was a Hawk, so you can imagine how surprised and pleased he was to discover that it was Mrs. Longlegs. Somehow Peter had always thought of Longlegs the Blue Heron as never alighting anywhere except on the ground. But here was Mrs. Longlegs in a tree. Having nothing to fear, Peter crept out from his hiding place that he might see better.

In the tree in which Mrs. Longlegs was perched and just below her he saw a little platform of sticks. He didn't suspect that it was a nest, because it looked too rough and loosely put together to be a nest. Probably he wouldn't have thought about it at all had not Mrs. Longlegs settled herself on it right while Peter was watching. It didn't seem big enough or strong enough to hold her, but it did.

"As I live," thought Peter, "I've found the nest of Longlegs! He and Mrs. Longlegs may be good fishermen but they certainly are mighty poor nest-builders. I don't see how under the sun Mrs. Longlegs ever gets on and off that nest without kicking the eggs out."

Peter sat around for a while, but as he didn't care to let his presence be known, and as there was no one to talk to, he presently made up his mind that being so near the Big River he would go over there to see if Plunger the Osprey was fishing again on this day.

When he reached the Big River, Plunger was not in sight. Peter was disappointed. He had just about made up his mind to return the way he had come, when from beyond the swamp, farther up the Big River, he heard the harsh, rattling cry of Rattles the Kingfisher. It reminded him of what he had come for, and he at once began to hurry in that direction.

Peter came out of the swamp on a little sandy beach. There he squatted for a moment, blinking his eyes, for out there the sun was very bright. Then a little way beyond him he discovered something that in his eager curiosity made him quite forget that he was out in the open where it was anything but safe for a Rabbit to be. What he saw was a high sandy bank. With a hasty glance this way and that way to make sure that no enemy was in sight, Peter scampered along the edge of the water till he was right

at the foot of that sandy bank. Then he squatted down and looked eagerly for a hole such as he imagined Rattles the Kingfisher might make. Instead of one hole he saw a lot of holes, but they were very small holes. He knew right away that Rattles couldn't possibly get in or out of a single one of those holes. In fact, those holes in the bank were no bigger than the holes Downy the Woodpecker makes in trees. Peter couldn't imagine who or what had made them.

As Peter sat there staring and wondering a trim little head appeared at the entrance to one of those holes. It was a trim little head with a very small bill and a snowy white throat. At first glance Peter thought it was his old friend, Skimmer the Tree Swallow, and he was just on the point of asking what under the sun Skimmer was doing in such a place as that, when with a lively twitter of greeting the owner of that little hole in the bank flew out and circled over Peter's head. It wasn't Skimmer at all. It was Banker the Bank Swallow, own cousin to Skimmer the Tree Swallow. Peter recognized him the instant he got a full view of him.

In the first place Banker was a little smaller than Skimmer. Then too, he was not nearly so handsome. His back, instead of being that beautiful rich steel-blue which makes Skimmer so handsome, was a sober grayish-brown. He was a little darker on his wings and tail. His breast, instead of being all snowy white, was crossed with a brownish band. His tail was more nearly square across the end than is the case with other members of the Swallow family.

"Wha—wha—what were you doing there?" stuttered Peter, his eyes popping right out with curiosity and excitement.

"Why, that's my home," twittered Banker.

"Do—do—do you mean to say that you live in a hole in the ground?" cried Peter.

"Certainly; why not?" twittered Banker as he snapped up a fly just over Peter's head.

"I don't know any reason why you shouldn't," confessed Peter. "But somehow it is hard for me to think of birds as living in holes in the ground. I've only just found out that Rattles the Kingfisher does. But I didn't suppose there were any others. Did you make that hole yourself, Banker?"

"Of course," replied Banker. "That is, I helped make it. Mrs. Banker did her share. 'Way in at the end of it we've got the nicest little nest of straw and feathers. What is more, we've got four white eggs in there, and Mrs. Banker is sitting on them now."

By this time the air seemed to be full of Banker's friends, skimming and circling this way and that, and going in and out of the little holes in the bank.

"I am like my big cousin, Twitter the Purple Martin, fond of society," explained Banker. "We Bank Swallows like our homes close together. You said that you had just learned that Rattles the Kingfisher has his home in a bank. Do you know where it is?"

"No," replied Peter. "I was looking for it when I discovered your home. Can you tell me where it is?"

"I'll do better than that;" replied Banker. "I'll show you where it is."

He darted some distance up along the bank and hovered for an instant close to the top. Peter scampered over there and looked up. There, just a few inches below the top, was another hole, a very much larger hole than those he had just left. As he was staring up at it a head with a long sharp bill and a crest which looked as if all the feathers on the top of his head had been brushed the wrong way, was thrust out. It was Rattles himself. He didn't seem at all glad to see Peter. In fact, he came out and darted at Peter angrily. Peter didn't wait to feel that sharp dagger-like bill. He took to his heels. He had seen what he started out to find and he was quite content to go home.

Peter took a short cut across the Green Meadows. It took him past a certain tall, dead tree. A sharp cry of "Kill-ee, kill-ee, kill-ee!" caused Peter to look up just in time to see a trim, handsome bird whose body was about the size of Sammy Jay's but whose longer wings and longer tail made him look bigger. One glance was enough to tell Peter that this was a member of the Hawk family, the smallest of the family. It was Killy the Sparrow Hawk. He is too small for Peter to fear him, so now Peter was possessed of nothing more than a very lively curiosity, and sat up to watch.

Out over the meadow grass Killy sailed. Suddenly, with beating wings, he kept himself in one place in the air and then dropped down into the grass. He was up again in an instant, and Peter could see that he had a fat grasshopper in his claws. Back to the top of the tall, dead tree he flew and there ate the grasshopper. When it was finished he sat up straight and still, so still that he seemed a part of the tree itself. With those wonderful eyes of his he was watching for another grasshopper or for a careless Meadow Mouse.

Very trim and handsome was Killy. His back was reddish-brown crossed by bars of black. His tail was reddish-brown with a band of black near its end and a white tip. His wings were slaty-blue with little bars of black, the longest feathers leaving white bars. Underneath he was a beautiful buff, spotted with black. His head was bluish with a reddish patch right on top. Before and behind each ear was a black mark. His rather short bill, like the bills of all the rest of his family, was hooked.

As Peter sat there admiring Killy, for he was handsome enough for any one to admire, he noticed for the first time a hole high up in the trunk of the tree, such a hole as Yellow Wing the Flicker might have made and probably did make. Right away Peter remembered what Jenny Wren had told him about Killy's making his nest in just such a hole. "I wonder," thought Peter, "if that is Killy's home."

Just then Killy flew over and dropped in the grass just in front of Peter, where he caught another fat grasshopper. "Is that your home up there?" asked Peter hastily.

"It certainly is, Peter," replied Killy. "This is the third summer Mrs. Killy and I have had our home there."

"You seem to be very fond of grasshoppers," Peter ventured.

"I am," replied Killy. "They are very fine eating when one can get enough of them."

"Are they the only kind of food you eat?" ventured Peter.

Killy laughed. It was a shrill laugh. "I should say not," said he. "I eat spiders and worms and all sorts of insects big enough to give a fellow a decent bite. But for real good eating give me a fat Meadow Mouse. I don't object to a Sparrow or some other small bird now and then, especially when I have a family of hungry youngsters to feed. But take it the season through, I live mostly on

grasshoppers and insects and Meadow Mice. I do a lot of good in this world, I'd have you know."

Peter said that he supposed that this was so, but all the time he kept thinking what a pity it was that Killy ever killed his feathered neighbors. As soon as he conveniently could he politely bade Killy good-bye and hurried home to the dear Old Briar-patch, there to think over how queer it seemed that a member of the hawk family should nest in a hollow tree and a member of the Swallow family should dig a hole in the ground.

Source:

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