

WHERE THUNDERFOOT THE BISON GOT HIS HUMP

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Thunderfoot the Bison, often called Buffalo, is not a handsome fellow, as you very well know if you have seen him or a picture of him. His head is carried low, very near the ground, and on his shoulders is a great hump. No, you wouldn't call him handsome. You would hardly call him good-looking even. In fact, you would, I suspect, call him homely. Certainly there is nothing about him to suggest pride. Yet according to the story Digger the Badger once told Peter Rabbit, pride and nothing less was the cause of that big hump which makes Thunderfoot appear so clumsy and homely.

Peter Rabbit, as you know, is very fond of stories. In this respect he is very like some other folks I know. Anyway, he never misses a chance for a story if he can help it. He had discovered that Digger the Badger and Old Man Coyote, both of whom had come to the Green Meadows from the Far West, were full of stories about their neighbors of the distant prairies, folk whom Peter never had seen. Sometimes when he had nothing else to do, Old Man Coyote would come over to the dear Old Briar-patch and tell stories to Peter, who sat safe behind the brambles. Perhaps Old Man Coyote hoped that Peter would become so interested that he would forget and come out of the dear Old Briar-patch. But Peter never did.

But most of the stories of the people of the Far West Peter got from Digger the Badger because, you see, he wasn't afraid to go beg for them. He knew that Digger couldn't catch him if he wanted to, and so when Grandfather Frog hadn't a story for him, Peter would go tease Digger for one. It was thus that he heard about Thunderfoot the Bison and where he got that great hump of his.

"I don't suppose," said Peter, "that there are any very big people out there on those prairies where you used to live any more than there are here on the Green Meadows. All the very big people seem to prefer to live in the Green Forest."

"It is that way now, I must admit," said Digger the Badger, "but it wasn't so in the old days, in the good old days when there were no terrible guns, and Thunderfoot and his followers shook the ground with their feet." Digger shook his head sadly.

Instantly Peter pricked up his ears. "Who was Thunderfoot?" he demanded.

Digger looked at Peter with such a look of pity for Peter's ignorance that Peter felt almost ashamed. "He doesn't live here and never did, so far as I have heard, so how should I know anything about him?" he added a wee bit defiantly.

"If that's the case," replied Digger, "it is time you learned about the Lord of the Prairies."

"But I want to know about Thunderfoot first!" cried Peter. "You can tell me about the Lord of the Prairies another time."

"Were you born stupid or have you grown so?" asked Digger impatiently. Then without waiting for an

answer he added: "Thunderfoot was the Lord of the Prairies. He ruled over the Wide Prairies just as Old King Bear ruled in the Green Forest. He ruled by might. He ruled because no one dared deny him the right to rule. He ruled because of his great size and his great strength. And all who lived on the Wide Prairies looked up to him and admired him and bowed before him and paid him the utmost respect. When he and his followers ran the earth shook, and the noise was like thunder, and everybody hastened to get out of the way and to warn his neighbors, crying: 'Here comes my Lord of the Prairies! Make way! Make way!' And truly Thunderfoot and his followers were a magnificent sight, so my great-grandfather told me, and he had it from his great-grandfather, who was told so by his great-grandfather, who saw it all with his own eyes. But that was in the days before Thunderfoot's head was brought low, and he was given the great hump which none of his descendants have ever been able to get rid of."

"Tell me about that hump and where my Lord of the Prairies, Thunderfoot the Bison, got it!" begged Peter, with shining eyes. That there was a story he hadn't the least doubt.

Digger the Badger flattened himself out on the ground, and into his eyes crept a dreamy, far-away look as if he were seeing things a great, great way off. "Way back In the days when the world was young, so my great-grandfather said," he began, "Thunderfoot, the first Bison, was given the Wide Prairies for a kingdom by Old Mother Nature and strode forth to take possession. Big was he, the biggest of all living creatures thereabouts. Strong was he with a strength none cared to test. And he was handsome. He held his head proudly. All who lived on the Wide Prairies admired him with a great admiration and hastened to pay homage to him.

"For a long time he ruled wisely. All the other people brought their disputes to him to be settled, and so wisely did he decide them that the fame of his wisdom spread even beyond the Wide Prairies and was talked about in the Green Forest. The humblest of his subjects could come to him freely and be sure of a hearing and that justice would be done. Big as he was and mighty as he was, he took the greatest care never to forget the rights of others.

"But there came a time when flattery turned his head, as the saying is. Mr. Coyote and Mr. Fox were the chief flatterers, and in all the Great World there were no smoother tongues than theirs. They never lost an opportunity to tell him how handsome he was, and how mighty he was, and how they admired him and looked up to him, and how unequalled was his wisdom. You see, being themselves dishonest and mischief-makers, they frequently were in trouble with their neighbors and would have to appear before Thunderfoot for judgment. Even when it went against them they praised the wisdom of it, admitting that they were in the wrong and begging forgiveness, all of which was very flattering to Thunderfoot.

"Little by little, without knowing it, he yielded to the flattery of Mr. Coyote and Mr. Fox. He liked to hear the pleasant things they said. Little by little it became easier to find them in the right than in the wrong when they were accused of wronging their neighbors. Of course they flattered him still more. They hinted to him that it was beneath the dignity of one so big and strong and handsome to take notice of the very small and humble people like Mr. Meadow Mouse and Mr. Toad and Mr. Meadow Lark and others of his subjects.

"Gradually the little people of the Wide Prairies began to notice a change in Thunderfoot. He became proud and vain. He openly boasted of his strength and fine appearance. When he met them he passed them haughtily, not seeing them at all, or at least appearing not to. No longer did he regard the rights of others. No longer did he watch out not to crush the nest of Mrs. Meadow Lark or to step on the babies of Danny Meadow Mouse. It came about that when the thunder of his feet was heard, those with homes

on the ground shivered with fright and hoped that my Lord of the Prairies would not come their way.

"One day, as he raced over the Wide Prairies for no reason but that he felt like running, Mr. Meadow Lark flew to meet him. Mr. Meadow Lark was in great distress. 'Turn aside, my Lord!' he begged. 'Turn aside, my Lord of the Prairies, for before you lies my nest with four precious eggs, and I fear you will step on them!'

"Thunderfoot the Bison, Lord of the Wide Prairies, tossed his head. 'If you will build your nest where it can be trodden on, you can't expect me to look out for it,' said he. 'If anything so unfortunate happens to it, it is your own fault, and you mustn't blame me.' And he neither looked down to see where he was putting his feet nor turned aside so much as an inch. On he galloped, and presently with a cry of fright out from beneath his feet flew Mrs. Meadow Lark, and at the very next step he trod on the little nest in the grass and crushed the four eggs.

"Mr. Coyote, who was racing beside him on one side and saw what had happened, grinned. Mr. Fox, who was racing beside him on the other side and saw what had happened, grinned. Seeing them grin, Thunderfoot himself grinned. Thus grinning heartlessly, they continued to run until they came to a place where Mother Nature walked among the flowers of the Wide Prairies. Mr. Coyote and Mr. Fox, whose heads were not held so high, saw her in time to put their tails between their legs and slink away. Thunderfoot, holding his head high, failed to see her until he was so close to her that it was with difficulty he stopped before running her down.

"My Lord of the Prairies seems in fine spirits,' said Mother Nature softly. 'Is all well with my Lord?'
"Thunderfoot tossed his head proudly. 'All is well,' said he.

"I am sorry that others cannot say as much,' replied Mother Nature, and all the softness was gone from her voice, and it was sharp. 'I seem to hear the sobs of a broken-hearted little Meadow Lark,' she continued. 'Little though she be and humble, she is as much to me as is my Lord of the Prairies who has made her suffer.'

"Stooping swiftly, Mother Nature picked up her staff and with it struck Thunderfoot on the neck, so that his head was brought low, and in fear of another blow he humped his shoulders up. 'Thus shall you be, still big, still strong, but hump-shouldered and carrying your head low in shame, no longer Lord of the Prairies, until such time as you restore to Mrs. Meadow Lark the eggs you destroyed,' said she, and turned her back on him.

"It was so. From that day on, Thunderfoot ceased to rule over the Wide Prairies. He was hump-shouldered and he carried his head low, looking and looking for the eggs he never could find to restore to Mrs. Meadow Lark. And though his children and his children's children became many, there never was one without the hump or who ceased to carry his head low in shame," concluded Digger the Badger.

Source:

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