

## How Old Mr. Heron Learned Patience

by Thornton W. Burgess

Whenever in the spring or summer Peter Rabbit visited the Smiling Pool or the Laughing Brook, he was pretty sure to run across Longlegs the Heron. The first time Peter saw him, he thought that never in all his life had he seen such a homely fellow. Longlegs was standing with his feet in the water and his head drawn back on his shoulders so that he didn't seem to have any neck at all. Peter sat and stared at him most impolitely. He knew that he was impolite, but for the life of him he couldn't help staring. "He's all legs," thought Peter. "Old Mother Nature must have been in a hurry when she made his great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather way back when the world was young and forgot to give him a neck. I wonder why he doesn't move."

But Longlegs didn't move. Peter stared as long as his patience held out. Then he gave up and went on to see what else he could find. But in a little while Peter was back again at the place where he had seen Longlegs. He didn't really expect to find him there, but he did. So far as Peter could see, Longlegs hadn't moved. "Must be asleep," thought Peter, and after watching for a few minutes, went away again. Half an hour later Peter was once more back. There stood Longlegs just as before. "Now I *know* he is asleep," muttered Peter.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something happened, something so sudden and surprising that Peter lost his balance and nearly fell over backward. The long bill which Peter had seen sticking forth from between those humped-up shoulders darted out and down into the water like a flash. Behind that bill was the longest neck Peter ever had seen! It was so long that Peter blinked to be perfectly sure that his eyes had not been playing him a trick. But they hadn't, for Longlegs was gulping down a little fish he had just caught, and when at last it was down, he stretched his neck up very straight while he looked this way and that way, and Peter just gasped.

"I thought he was all legs, but instead of that he's all neck," muttered Peter.

Then Longlegs slowly drew his head down, and it seemed to Peter as if he must somehow wind that long neck up inside his body to get it so completely out of the way. In a minute Longlegs was standing just as before, with seemingly no neck at all. Peter watched until he grew tired, but Longlegs didn't move again. After that Peter went every chance he had to watch Longlegs, but he never had patience to watch long enough to see Longlegs catch another fish. He spoke of it one day to Grandfather Frog. At the mere mention of Longlegs, Grandfather Frog sat up and took notice.

"Where did you see him?" asked Grandfather Frog, and Peter thought his voice sounded anxious. "Down the Laughing Brook," replied Peter. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing," said Grandfather Frog, trying to make his voice sound as if he weren't interested. "I just wondered where the long-legged nuisance might be."

"He's the laziest fellow I ever saw," declared Peter. "He just stands doing nothing all day." "Huh!" exclaimed Grandfather Frog. "If your family had suffered from him as much as mine has, you would say that he was altogether too busy. Ask the Trout what they think, or the Minnow family." "Oh," said Peter, "you mean that when he stands still that way he is fishing."

Grandfather Frog nodded.

"Well," said Peter, "all I can say is that he is the most patient fellow I ever saw. I didn't suppose there was such patience."

"He comes rightly by it," returned Grandfather Frog. "He gets it from his great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather, who lived when the world was young. He learned it then."

"How?" demanded Peter, eager for a story.

Grandfather Frog's eyes took on a far-away look, as if he were seeing into that long-ago past. "Chug-a-rum!" he began. "It always seemed to old Mr. Heron as if Old Mother Nature must have made him last of all the birds and was in such a hurry that she didn't care how he looked. His legs were so long and his neck was so long that all his neighbors laughed at him and made fun of him. He was just as awkward as he looked. His long legs were in his way. He didn't know what to do with his long neck. When he tried to run, everybody shouted with laughter. When he tried to fly, he stretched his long neck out, and then he couldn't keep his balance and just flopped about, while all his neighbors laughed harder than ever. Poor Mr. Heron was ashamed of himself, actually ashamed of himself. He quite overlooked the fact that Old Mother Nature had given him a really beautiful coat of feathers. Some of those who laughed at him would have given anything to have possessed such a beautiful coat. But Mr. Heron didn't know this. He couldn't bear to be laughed at, wherein he was very like most people.

"So he tried his best to keep out of sight as much as possible. Now in those days, as at present, the rushes grew tall beside the Smiling Pool, and among them Mr. Heron found a hiding-place. Because his legs were long, he could wade out in the water and keep quite out of sight of those who lived on the land. So he found a use for his long legs and was glad that they were long. At first he used to go ashore to hunt for food. One day as he was wading ashore, he surprised a school of little fish and managed to catch one. It tasted so good that he wanted more, and every day he went fishing. Whenever he saw little fish swimming where the water was shallow, he would rush in among them and do his best to catch one. Sometimes he did, but more often he didn't. You see, he was so clumsy and awkward that he made a great splashing, and the fish would hear him coming and get away.

"One day after he had tried and tried without catching even one, he stopped just at the edge of the rushes to rest. His long neck ached, and to rest it he laid it back on his shoulders. For a long time he stood there, resting. The water around his feet was cool and comforting. He was very comfortable but for one thing,—he was hungry. He was just making up his mind to go on and hunt for something to eat when he saw a school of little fish swimming straight towards him. 'Perhaps,' thought he, 'if I keep perfectly still, they will come near enough for me to catch one.' So he kept perfectly still. He didn't dare even stretch his long neck up. Sure enough, the little fish swam almost to his very feet. They didn't see him at all. When they were near enough, he darted his long neck forward and caught one without any trouble at all. Mr. Heron was almost as surprised as the fish he had caught. You see, he discovered that with his neck laid back on his shoulders that way, he could dart his head forward ever so much quicker than when he was holding it up straight. It really was a great discovery for Mr. Heron.

"Of course all the other fish darted away in great fright, but Mr. Heron didn't mind. He settled himself in great contentment, for now he was less hungry. By and by some foolish tadpoles came wriggling along. 'I'll just try catching one of them for practice. Maybe they are good to eat,' thought Mr. Heron, and just as before darted his head and great bill downward and caught a tadpole.

"Um-m, they are good!" exclaimed Mr. Heron, and once more settled himself to watch and wait.

"That was a sad day for the Frog family, but a great day for Mr. Heron when he discovered that tadpoles were good to eat." Grandfather Frog sighed mournfully. "Yes," he continued, "that was a great day for Mr. Heron. He had discovered that he could gain more by patient waiting than by frantic hunting, and he had found that his long neck really was a blessing. After that, whenever he was hungry, he would stand perfectly still beside some little pool where foolish young fish or careless tadpoles were at play and wait patiently until they came within reach.

"One day he was startled into an attempt to fly by hearing the stealthy footsteps of Mr. Fox behind him. His head was drawn back on his shoulders at the time, and he was so excited that he forgot to straighten it out. Just imagine how surprised he was, and how surprised Mr. Fox was, when he sailed away in beautiful flight, his long legs trailing behind him. With his neck carried that way, he could fly as well as any one. From that day on, no one laughed at Mr. Heron because of his long legs and long neck. Mr. Heron himself became proud of them. You see, he had learned how to use what he had been given. Also he had learned the value of patience. So he was happy and envied no one. But he still liked best to keep by himself and became known as the lone fisherman, just as Longlegs is to-day. Chug-a-rum! Isn't that Longlegs coming this way this very minute? This is no place for me!"

With a great splash Grandfather Frog dived into the Smiling Pool.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "How Old Mr. Heron Learned Patience." *Mother West Wind "How" Stories*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers. 1920. 205 – 218. Electronic.