

Why the Curlew's Bill is Long and Crooked

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Easy
6 min read

When we reached War Eagle's lodge we stopped near the door, for the old fellow was singing—singing some old, sad song of younger days and keeping time with his tom-tom. Somehow the music made me sad and not until it had ceased, did we enter.

“How! How!”—he greeted us, with no trace of the sadness in his voice that I detected in his song.

“You have come here to-night to learn why the Curlew's bill is so long and crooked. I will tell you, as I promised, but first I must smoke.”

In silence we waited until the pipe was laid aside, then War Eagle began:

“By this time you know that OLD-man was not always wise, even if he did make the world, and all that is on it. He often got into trouble but something always happened to get him out of it. What I shall tell you now will show you that it is not well to try to do things just because others do them. They may be right for others, and wrong for us, but OLD-man didn't understand that, you see.

“One day he saw some mice playing and went near to watch them. It was spring-time, and the frost was just coming out of the ground. A big flat rock was sticking out of a bank near a creek, and the sun had melted the frost from the earth about it, loosening it, so that it was about to fall. The Chief-Mouse would sing a song, while all the other mice danced, and then the chief would cry ‘now!’ and all the mice would run past the big rock. On the other side, the Chief-Mouse would sing again, and then say ‘now!’—back they would come—right under the dangerous rock. Sometimes little bits of dirt would crumble and fall near the rock, as though warning the mice that the rock was going to fall, but they paid no attention to the warning, and kept at their playing. Finally OLD-man said:

“Say, Chief-Mouse, I want to try that. I want to play that game. I am a good runner.’

“He wasn’t, you know, but he thought he could run. That is often where we make great mistakes—when we try to do things we were not intended to do.

“No—no!’ cried the Chief-Mouse, as OLD-man prepared to make the race past the rock. ‘No!—No!—you will shake the ground. You are too heavy, and the rock may fall and kill you. My people are light of foot and fast. We are having a good time, but if you should try to do as we are doing you might get hurt, and that would spoil our fun.’

“Ho!’ said OLD-man, ‘stand back! I’ll show you what a runner I am.’

“He ran like a grizzly bear, and shook the ground with his weight. Swow!—came the great rock on top of OLD-man and held him fast in the mud. My! how he screamed and called for aid. All the Mice-people ran away to find help. It was a long time before the Mice-people found anybody, but they finally found the Coyote, and told him what had happened. Coyote didn’t like OLD-man very much, but he said he would go and see what he could do, and he did. The Mice-people showed him the way, and when they all reached the spot—there was OLD-man deep in the mud, with the big rock on his back. He was angry and was saying things people should not say, for they do no good and make the mind wicked.

“Coyote said: ‘Keep still, you big baby. Quit kicking about so. You are splashing mud in my eyes. How can I see with my eyes full of mud? Tell me that. I am going to try to help you out of your trouble.’ He tried but OLD-man insulted Coyote, and called him a name that is not good, so the Coyote said, ‘Well, stay there,’ and went away.

“Again OLD-man began to call for helpers, and the Curlew, who was flying over, saw the trouble, and came down to the ground to help. In those days Curlew had a short, stubby bill, and he thought that he could break the rock by pecking it. He pecked and pecked away without making any headway, till OLD-man grew angry at him, as he did at the Coyote. The harder the Curlew worked, the worse OLD-man scolded him. OLD-man lost his temper altogether, you see, which is a bad thing to do, for we lose our friends with it, often. Temper is like a bad dog about a lodge—no friends will come to see us when he is about.

“Curlew did his best but finally said: ‘I’ll go and try to find somebody else to help you. I guess I am too small and weak. I shall come back to you.’ He was standing close to OLD-man when he spoke, and OLD-man reached out and grabbed the Curlew by the bill. Curlew began to scream—oh, my—oh, my—oh, my—as you still hear them in the air when it is morning. OLD-man hung onto the bill and finally pulled it out long and slim, and bent it downward, as it is to-day. Then he let go and laughed at the Curlew.

“You are a queer-looking bird now. That is a homely bill, but you shall always wear it and so shall all of your children, as long as there are Curlews in the world.’

“I have forgotten who it was that got OLD-man out of his trouble, but it seems to me it was the bear. Anyhow he did get out somehow, and lived to make trouble, until Manitou grew tired of him.

“There are good things that OLD-man did and to-morrow night, if you will come early, I will tell you how OLD-man made the world over after the water made its war on the land, scaring all the animal-people and the bird-people. I will also tell you how he made the first man and the first woman and who they were. But now the grouse is fast asleep; nobody is stirring but those who were made to see in the dark, like the owl and the wolf.—Ho!”

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