



Why the Kingfisher Always Wears a War-Bonnet

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Autumn nights on the upper Missouri river in Montana are indescribably beautiful, and under their spell imagination is a constant companion to him who lives in wilderness, lending strange, weird echoes to the voice of man or wolf, and unnatural shapes in shadow to commonplace forms.

The moon had not yet climbed the distant mountain range to look down on the humbler lands when I started for War Eagle's lodge; and dimming the stars in its course, the milky-way stretched across the jewelled sky. "The wolf's trail," the Indians call this filmy streak that foretells fair weather, and to-night it promised much, for it seemed plainer and brighter than ever before.

"How—how!" greeted War Eagle, making the sign for me to be seated near him, as I entered his lodge. Then he passed me his pipe and together we smoked until the children came.

Entering quietly, they seated themselves in exactly the same positions they had occupied on the previous evenings, and patiently waited in silence. Finally War Eagle laid the pipe away and said: "Ho! Little Buffalo Calf, throw a big stick on the fire and I will tell you why the Kingfisher wears a war-bonnet."

The boy did as he was bidden. The sparks jumped toward the smoke-hole and the blaze lighted up the lodge

until it was bright as daytime, when War Eagle continued:

“You have often seen Kingfisher at his fishing along the rivers, I know; and you have heard him laugh in his queer way, for he laughs a good deal when he flies. That same laugh nearly cost him his life once, as you will see. I am sure none could see the Kingfisher without noticing his great head-dress, but not many know how he came by it because it happened so long ago that most men have forgotten.

“It was one day in the winter-time when OLD-man and the Wolf were hunting. The snow covered the land and ice was on all of the rivers. It was so cold that OLD-man wrapped his robe close about himself and his breath showed white in the air. Of course the Wolf was not cold; wolves never get cold as men do. Both OLD-man and the Wolf were hungry for they had travelled far and had killed no meat. OLD-man was complaining and grumbling, for his heart is not very good. It is never well to grumble when we are doing our best, because it will do no good and makes us weak in our hearts. When our hearts are weak our heads sicken and our strength goes away. Yes, it is bad to grumble.

“When the sun was getting low OLD-man and the Wolf came to a great river. On the ice that covered the water, they saw four fat Otters playing.

“‘There is meat,’ said the Wolf; ‘wait here and I will try to catch one of those fellows.’

“‘No!—No!’ cried OLD-man, ‘do not run after the Otter on the ice, because there are air-holes in all ice that covers rivers, and you may fall in the water and die.’ OLD-man didn’t care much if the Wolf did drown. He was afraid to be left alone and hungry in the snow—that was all.

“‘Ho!’ said the Wolf, ‘I am swift of foot and my teeth are white and sharp. What chance has an Otter against me? Yes, I will go,’ and he did.

“Away ran the Otters with the Wolf after them, while OLD-man stood on the bank and shivered with fright and cold. Of course the Wolf was faster than the Otter, but he was running on the ice, remember, and slipping a good deal. Nearer and nearer ran the Wolf. In fact he was just about to seize an Otter, when SPLASH!—into an air-hole all the Otters went. Ho! the Wolf was going so fast he couldn’t stop, and SWOW! into the air-hole he went like a badger after mice, and the current carried him under the ice. The Otters knew that hole was there. That was their country and they were running to reach that same hole all the time, but the Wolf didn’t know that.

“Old-man saw it all and began to cry and wail as women do. Ho! but he made a great fuss. He ran along the bank of the river, stumbling in the snowdrifts, and crying like a woman whose child is dead; but it was because he didn’t want to be left in that country alone that he cried—not because he loved his brother, the Wolf. On and on he ran until he came to a place where the water was too swift to freeze, and there he waited and watched for the Wolf to come out from under the ice, crying and wailing and making an awful noise, for a man.

“Well—right there is where the thing happened. You see, Kingfisher can’t fish through the ice and he knows it, too; so he always finds places like the one OLD-man found. He was there that day, sitting on the limb of a birch-tree, watching for fishes, and when OLD-man came near to Kingfisher’s tree, crying like an old woman, it tickled the Fisher so much that he laughed that queer, chattering laugh.

“OLD-man heard him and—Ho! but he was angry. He looked about to see who was laughing at him and that made Kingfisher laugh again, longer and louder than before. This time OLD-man saw him and SWOW! he threw his war-club at Kingfisher; tried to kill the bird for laughing. Kingfisher ducked so quickly that OLD-man’s club just grazed the feathers on his head, making them stand up straight.

“‘There,’ said OLD-man, ‘I’ll teach you to laugh at me when I’m sad. Your feathers are standing up on the top of your head now and they will stay that way, too. As long as you live you must wear a head-dress, to pay for your laughing, and all your children must do the same.

“This was long, long ago, but the Kingfishers have not forgotten, and they all wear war-bonnets, and always will as long as there are Kingfishers.

“Now I will say good night, and when the sun sleeps again I will tell you why the curlew’s bill is so long and crooked. Ho!”

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