



Why the Night Hawk's Wings are Beautiful

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Easy
7 min read

I WAS awakened by the voice of the campcrier, and although it was yet dark I listened to his message.

The camp was to move. All were to go to the mouth of the Maria's — "The River That Scolds at the Other" — the Indians call this stream, that disturbs the waters of the Missouri with its swifter flood.

On through the camp the crier rode, and behind him the lodge-fires glowed in answer to his call. The village was awake, and soon the thunder of hundreds of hoofs told me that the pony-bands were being driven into camp, where the faithful were being roped for the journey. Fires flickered in the now fading darkness, and down came the lodges as though wizard hands had touched them. Before the sun had come to light the world, we were on our way to "The River That Scolds at the Other."

Not a cloud was in the sky, and the wind was still. The sun came and touched the plains and hilltops with the light that makes all wild things glad. Here and there a jackrabbit scurried away, often followed by a pack of dogs, and sometimes, though not often, they were overtaken and devoured on the spot. Bands of graceful antelope bounded out of our way, stopping on a knoll to watch the strange procession with wondering eyes, and once we saw a dust-cloud raised by a moving herd of buffalo, in the distance.

So the day wore on, the scene constantly changing as we travelled. Wolves and coyotes looked at us from almost every knoll and hilltop; and sage-hens sneaked to cover among the patches of sage-brush, scarcely ten feet away from our ponies. Toward sundown we reached a grove of cottonwoods near the mouth of the Maria's, and in an incredibly short space of time the lodges took form. Soon, from out the tops of a hundred camps, smoke was curling just as though the lodges had been there always, and would forever remain.

As soon as supper was over I found the children, and together we sought War Eagle's lodge. He was in a happy mood and insisted upon smoking two pipes before commencing his story-telling. At last he said:

"To-night I shall tell you why the Night-hawk wears fine clothes. My grandfather told me about it when I was young. I am sure you have seen the Night-hawk sailing over you, dipping and making that strange noise. Of course there is a reason for it.

"Old-man was travelling one day in the springtime; but the weather was fine for that time of year. He stopped often and spoke to the bird-people and to the animal-people, for he was in good humor that day. He talked pleasantly with the trees, and his heart grew tender. That is, he had good thoughts; and of course they made him happy. Finally he felt tired and sat down to rest on a big, round stone — the kind of stone our white friend there calls a boulder. Here he rested for a while, but the stone was cold, and he felt it through his robe; so he said:

"'Stone, you seem cold to-day. You may have my robe. I have hundreds of robes in my camp, and I don't need this one at all.' That was a lie he told about having so many robes. All he had was the one he wore.

"He spread his robe over the stone, and then started down the hill, naked, for it was really a fine day. But storms hide in the mountains, and are never far away when it is springtime. Soon it began to snow — then the wind blew from the north with a good strength behind it. Old-man said:

"'Well, I guess I do need that robe myself, after all. That stone never did anything for me anyhow. Nobody is ever good to a stone. I'll just go back and get my robe.'

“Back he went and found the stone. Then he pulled the robe away, and wrapped it about himself. Ho! but that made the stone angry — Ho! Old-man started to run down the hill, and the stone ran after him. Ho! it was a funny race they made, over the grass, over smaller stones, and over logs that lay in the way, but Old-man managed to keep ahead until he stubbed his toe on a big sage-brush, and fell — swow!

“Now I have you!’ cried the stone — ‘now I’ll kill you, too! Now I will teach you to give presents and then take them away,’ and the stone rolled right on top of Old-man, and sat on his back.

“It was a big stone, you see, and Old-man couldn’t move it at all. He tried to throw off the stone but failed. He squirmed and twisted — no use — the stone held him fast. He called the stone some names that are not good; but that never helps any. At last he began to call:

“‘Help! — Help! — Help!’ but nobody heard him except the Night-hawk, and he told the Old-man that he would help him all he could; so he flew away up in the air — so far that he looked like a black speck. Then he came down straight and struck that rock an awful blow — ‘swow!’ — and broke it in two pieces. Indeed he did. The blow was so great that it spoiled the Night-hawk’s bill, forever — made it queer in shape, and jammed his head, so that it is queer, too. But he broke the rock, and Old-man stood upon his feet.

“Thank you, Brother Night-hawk,’ said Old-man, ‘now I will do something for you. I am going to make you different from other birds — make you so people will always notice you.’

“You know that when you break a rock the powdered stone is white, like snow; and there is always some of the white powder whenever you break a rock, by pounding it. Well, Old-man took some of the fine powdered stone and shook it on the Night-hawk’s wings in spots and stripes — made the great white stripes you have seen on his wings, and told him that no other bird could have such marks on his clothes.

“All the Night-hawk’s children dress the same way now; and they always will as long as there are Night-hawks. Of course their clothes make them proud; and that is why they keep at flying over people’s heads — soaring and dipping and turning all the time, to show off their pretty wings.

“That is all for to-night. Muskrat, tell your father I would run Buffalo with him tomorrow — Ho!”

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