

The Feather in His Cap

“I am just here to pick up a few things,” the woodsman announced as he entered the store. They all stared at him. The weight of his old heavy coat lowered his shoulders which were thinning with his age. The power in his arms was still there but his movements were slower. He removed his hat, his cherished hat. He always carried it in one or the other of his hands careful never to lay it down carelessly. His wife bought him that hat when they moved to the small town he now spent his days alone. “John,” said Henry, the storeowner, “Are you going to try again today?” A low chuckle came from the rest of visitors in the store. “Oh yes, yes I am,” answered John. I will find my feather and once and for all be able to join your band and play music with the rest of you.”

The town was small and had one peculiar rule. If you wanted to play in the town band you had to wear a feather in your cap. It had to be gotten by the person wearing it after spending two nights in the local woods, alone. The reason for the chuckle was that John, the woodsman, after spending unending days in the woods chopping down trees always came home. Not one night was ever spent in the woods. He tried but he loved his wife more so he would come home night after night without accomplishing the reward of capturing a feather.

“Is he coming today?” asked Bertie. “I don’t know, he’s moving awfully slow these days,” chirped Gertie. “He’ll be back to see me,” sang Flirtie. With a flutter of pinfeathers covering the branch he was perched on Dirtie said, “Oh give it a rest Flirtie, it’s not always about you.” “How do you know?” Flirtie squawked back. “Okay, okay, calm down, we all know he’ll be back today but what is he looking for anyway?” requested Pertie the leader of the flock. “I think it’s something he needs, really bad,” Sertie quietly putting in her opinion. “Ya, well I think it’s something he’s missing,” said Mertie point to his head where his brain is located. The laughter was so loud they all jumped from their perches to flutter their wings and do flips in the air.

The birds were a strange flock. They had come together over the past few years due to a set of circumstances that is very familiar to birds. Protection. They were part of a dying breed and wanted to make sure somehow they were remembered. A great eagle kept them safe in one of its nests. He protected them from other animals, the weather, and especially man. When he had to leave to protect his mate and his offspring earlier this year he left them one of his feathers. It was so beautiful and so perfect they made a pact to keep it always and give it the same protection the eagle had given them.

Pertie was a natural leader; he was a dazzling brown with white specks on his wings. He was not the oldest of the flock but everyone listened when he spoke. His mate Sertie, was just as dazzling but she only had a few white specks on her wings. Bertie and Gertie were the oldest. Their color had less dazzle these days but their white specks were in the exact same places on both their wings. Flirtie and Dirtie, well they were just a pair. Flirtie had four shades of glittery browns set in rows down both of her wings. Her white specks went down her back feathers on to her tail. Dirtie lost pinfeathers continuously. His specks were the pinfeathers that flew up and around him and landed on his back. Mertie joined the flock when his mate was lost to a careless hunter last spring. It was questionable if he was all there but he was a nice old bird.

As a flock they did almost everything together. They watched out for each other with great caring and love. Oh yes, there are three more of the same kind but they stick to themselves. Vertie, Hertie, and Nertie cause trouble, all the time. They think it's funny they are the last of the species and dare fate to step in whenever it can to see if they will win or lose. They take pleasure in putting the rest of the flock in danger too. Vertie comes up with the ideas and sends Hertie, who lives up to his name, and Nertie, a rough edged female who wants to belong, out to complete the plan. Once, Vertie sent Hertie and Nertie to get Dirtie and bring him into a deeper part of the woods. They showed him where he could get some delicious berries from a special bush but neglected to tell him it was where Snake lived. The Great Eagle swept in just in time to grasp Snake in its talons and carry it away before Snake ate Dirtie.

"Who is in charge of the feather today?" asked Flirtie. "We are," came a chorus answer from Bertie and Gertie. "When will it be my turn, I will make a great watcher," Flirtie squeaked back loud enough for Pertie to hear. "When you stop looking after yourself and think about the other birds," Mertie responded with a smirk. "We have to find food soon and fly back to the tree before he gets there," Pertie instructed the flock. "You two take the feather back, we'll bring you something. And watch out for those three troublemakers. I haven't seen them yet today but I know they are up to something." Bertie and Gertie headed back to the tree where the old man came everyday to gather wood for the small townspeople. He was always careful to look for the birds so he wouldn't chop the tree with their homes in it.

Vertie was already back at the tree thinking up his next misbehavior. Nertie and Hertie were close by on the ground. They were running at each other full speed to see which one would back out first. Both were tough so neither would back down. The results were painful for them because instead of using their talons to knock each other down they would use their heads. There was "ooooohing," and "owwwwing" all over the ground they were having their contest on. Vertie flew down between them and put his wings out to stop them. Both kept pushing on his wings trying to get at the other until Vertie folded his wings and the two of them fell to the ground. "Get up, get up, I have a plan," hissed Vertie. "You see those two trees right there, well this is what we're going to do."

Bertie and Gertie carefully placed the feather in the nest. They kept it out of the direction of the wind so it wouldn't be carried away. "Doesn't our nest seem a little high to you?" asked Gertie. "No," answered Bertie a little irritated because his stomach was grumbling and no one had yet returned with food. "But..." Gertie went on. "I remember this branch from yesterday and the day before and the day before that," snapped Bertie. "Now stop carrying on." The next sound was the smack, snap, smack of the woodsman's axe cutting into the very tree the two birds were sitting in. Bertie was half asleep trying to forget his hunger and Gertie was attending to the prized feather tucked carefully into their nest. Neither seemed aware of what was happening below. A few more smacks, snaps of the chopped wood, and a great wedge had been cut into the tree trunk. "Tiiimmmmberrrrr," yelled the woodsman as the tree soared to the ground landing with a great thump and a bounce. Gertie and Bertie were sent sailing off their nest into the air. They watched as the tree hit the ground and their nest was lost in the leaves and brush of the fallen branches. Both flew to the nearest branch stunned at what they saw.

Above them were sounds of muffled chuckling. They looked up to see Vertie, Hertie, and Nertie with their wings over their beaks to hide their smiles. Turning even farther around Bertie noticed something familiar about where he was sitting. Gertie did the same then both their eyes met and they realized what the three troublemakers had done. This was their tree not the one they found their nest in! What were they going to do? Not only was their nest gone but the precious feather was too. "I'll get them, one by one, I'll get them!" Bertie was screaming. "No, stop," Gertie cried. "They will never let you get near them. We have to rescue the feather before it's too late. Where are the others?" Bertie was still huffing when he said, "I don't know but I'm going to give them what for too!" "Let's go," he yelled to Gertie as he dove for the fallen tree.

The woodsman was busy cutting off branches and making piles according to sizes. He was not aware of the commotion from above. Working his way up the trunk his swinging axe came to a sudden halt. There in front of him lay the feather. It was magnificent. Carefully he picked it up between two of his calloused fingers and looked at it from every angle. What color, what strength it had, what a grand bird it must have come from. With his other hand he removed his hat, the one from his wife, and put the bony end of the feather into the band on his hat. He tipped the feather on an angle so the wind would not catch it and blow it off. Proudly he placed the hat on his head and headed for town. Surely he would be able to play with the town band now.

The rest of the flock landed in their usual spots in the tree next to their nests. They were carrying a lot of extra food so a soft landing was necessary. The troublemakers were still up above but now they were in a roaring laughter unable to hold back their pride. "Evening fellow birds," came a deadly serious greeting from Pertie behind the perch the three were sitting on. "What's so funny?" Hertie jumped right up and proclaimed, "Well it looks like the end of a beautiful relationship." "Yea, end of that one anyway," Nertie exclaimed in between laughs. "Uh, we have to eat dinner now," announced Vertie. "Let's go, NOW!"

Pertie watched them fly away. Instead of flying up into the wind currents they all dove downward. Pertie thought this was a little strange so he kept watching. As his eyes moved lower and lower he became aware of two birds fluttering and flapping their wings wildly above a mass of branches down below. He called to the rest of the flock and took off for the forest floor. "Squawk! Squawk!" yelled Gertie. "It's gone, it's gone!" cried Bertie. As the flock got closer they saw the cut tree lying with its branches stripped from its trunk and the nest off to one side.

Pertie screeched loudly at the two of them, "What is wrong, what happened, are you alright?" The two elderly birds explained the trick the three troublemakers played on them. They said they were fine but the feather was lost. The woodsman had found it and placed it in his cap. He was already headed back to the town. "Flirtie, Dirtie, follow the woodsman, get whatever information you can and come back quickly," Pertie instructed. The two flew off in the direction of the town. "We have to get that feather back, it's our greatest possession, we made a promise," Sertie said in her quiet voice.

Flirtie and Dirtie found the woodsman and followed him to the general store where the other townspeople were gathered. They perched on the outside windowsill straining to listen in on the conversation. “Well John, what have you got there? That’s quite a feather in your cap! How did you happen to get it?” commented and questioned Henry the storeowner. “It fell out of the sky, like a miracle,” replied John. The leader of the band stood up, passed judgment on the feather and said, “He’s in!” The woodsman’s heart was beating so fast with excitement that his grin almost popped off his face. “Thank you, thank you,” he repeated and rushed home to get his instrument.

Meanwhile Flirtie and Dirtie while still unable to make sense of the whole thing, kept their eyes glued to the location of the feather. “Now’s our chance, let’s get it,” Dirtie whispered. As usual Flirtie had caught sight of herself in the windowpane and lost all reasoning as to why they were there. “Flirtie! Come on!” screeched Dirtie. The woodsman had disappeared so the two birds flew high to scan the whole area. “There he is!” sang Flirtie. The woodsman went into the door of his cabin and sat down next to his fireplace. The two birds once again found themselves on the outside looking in. The woodsman brought out a leather case and opened it. The violin was perfect he played it every night. He began to play, warming the strings to be able to play with the band. The birds could do nothing but listen. The sounds from the violin were so soothing the two of them sighed and got very comfortable on their perch.

Suddenly a flurry of feathers was above them. Mertie landed with a thud against the window. Squawking loudly he asked, “What are you two doing? We are waiting for you at the tree. Do you have any information about the feather?” “SSSSShhhhhhh,” came in harmony from the two next to him. “Listen,” sang Flirtie in a low whisper. The violin sang even better than Flirtie and Mertie had to nod in agreement to the sound coming from inside the cabin. “Just wait,” said Dirtie, “I think he’s going back to that other place in a minute.” He was right. The woodsman carefully set the violin back in its leather case, put on his hat, and headed for the door. “Now’s our chance!” said Mertie. As the woodsman came out of his door the three birds took off from their perch straight at the hat. Whoosh! came one swoop. Flap, flap, flap came from the other two. The hat was knocked from the woodsman’s head and fell to the ground. The feather was knocked loose and Mertie grabbed it by its bony end making sure not to harm the feather. The woodsman glanced fast enough to see the three birds recognizing them from the tree with the nests. His shock was not over the attack but the fact that they went for the feather not him. The woodsman hung his head and walked back into the cabin. His chance to play with the band was gone.

On a nearby rooftop perched on a chimney, very proud of himself, Vertie had a large grin on his beak. All that over a feather he thought. Flap, flap, swoosh. Another bird lands on the chimney. “What’s all the commotion?” she asked. Vertie craned his neck to the left. The smile turned into a drooling wide beaked gape. She was beautiful! She was... he was speechless. “I was wondering if you heard the woodsman play tonight. He has a gift of song on that instrument he plays. Did you see him?” she tried to ask again. Vertie just mumbled, “Um, um, well no, well yes.” The female bird flew to the windowsill of the cabin. Vertie followed close behind. “He looks so sad, do you know why he could be so sad?” she stared at Vertie when she asked. Vertie replied, “Well I might know a little.” Then she explained and asked, “He’s been searching for a feather for his cap for so long. He can’t play with the town band unless he has a feather in his cap. Do you know if he found one yet?” “Welllll maybe,” Vertie answered slowly. “You say well a lot don’t you?” she asked sharply.

Vertie took both wings put them around hers and said, "Don't move, I'll be right back." He flew off in the direction of the forest to find the flock and the feather. Vertie found Nertie and Hertie sitting in the nest on the ground. "This is comfy," Hertie said. "Ya, just the right size to raise a family," replied Nertie. Hertie flapped straight up and smack into Vertie. After they both shook themselves off Vertie said, "Listen, I need your help, come with me, ok?" Hertie, in a shocked tone said, "You never asked for our help before, you always told us what to do, this must be serious, ok, we'll help." Vertie flew straight to the tree where the flock was gathered around the feather. Nertie spoke up this time, "Wait a minute, I didn't agree to fight with these birds." "We're not going to fight, I just, well I just needed you, for support."

Vertie perched on a branch near the rest of the flock. Pertie flew right into his beak almost pushing Vertie off the branch. Pertie squawked loudly, "We don't want you here or your friends, haven't you done enough damage?" "I know, I'm sorry," said Vertie. You could have heard a pine needle drop. The whole flock including Hertie and Nertie were perched in silence at that last comment. "I need the feather, right now, please." Vertie begged with a sense of compassion. "No way!" shouted Gertie and Bertie together. The others chimed in yelling at Vertie to get off the tree, go away, who did he think he was. Pertie whistled his high pitched tweet to get everyone's attention. "Why would we ever do that for you?" he asked.

"Okay, okay, don't give it to me. Leave it here but come with me to meet this bird I met." Vertie begged again. A round of snickers went through the flock. "She's at the woodsman's cabin waiting for me, please just come with me," Vertie asked again. Sertie stepped up and said, "This is his one chance to redeem himself, let's give him that chance." Everyone bobbed their heads in agreement and took off flying in a line behind Vertie. Flying high over the forest Vertie strained to find the cabin. He flew away so fast he couldn't remember the exact location. "I knew he was lying," screeched Mertie. "Ya, let's forget it and go back to the nest to protect the feather," squawked Dirtie. "Just a little further," Vertie was begging again.

Then he saw it, the chimney. He made a dive run straight for it missing it by inches. With a flutter of his wings he came to rest on the windowsill of the cabin. She was still there, waiting for him. "Everyone, this is..., I don't even know your name," Vertie was sputtering again. "Sheila, I'm Sheila, hi," she answered. Again, but in a larger number, all the beaks hung open. Drool came from the beaks of the male birds. "She will tell you why I need the feather. Please listen," Vertie begged for the last time. Sheila explained about the band, the townspeople, the woodsman's wife and his hat but most of all about the violin. Just then the woodsman came over to the window and opened it just a crack. Then he took out his violin and played. The song melted all over the outside. It seemed to reach the forest and beyond. The whole flock closed their eyes and rocked to the sounds coming from inside the cabin.

A mighty FLAP! FLAP! FLAP! came from above. It was their friend the eagle. He had heard the soft sounds of the violin music and wanted to find where they were coming from. The whole flock gathered around him all explaining at once what was going on and what had happened. The eagle spread his wings. The flock shook with fear and awe. The eagle reached under his wing with his beak and plucked one of his feathers. It was more beautiful than the first one they had received. Pertia stepped up to accept the feather. "This is not for you," said the eagle. "This is for Vertie." A gasp was let out from each of the flock. "He will take care of it won't you Vertie?" asked the eagle with a very clear look in his eye. A small smirk came over the troublemaker as he answered, "Oh I sure do, yes I do." Again, but louder now, another gasp was let out of the rest of the flock's now open beaks. Sticking out his breast, holding the feather by the bony end high in his beak, Vertie hopped straight through the window and on to the small table next to the woodsman. Dropping the feather in front of him Vertie backed away flying to the windowsill. The woodsman hung his head again. Tears were running down his cheeks. As he looked up through his tears he caught the sight of the great eagle. He bowed, found his hat and placed the feather bony end in on an angle so it would not blow away into the band on his hat.

With that sight the flock took off with the eagle leading the way. Vertie stayed behind. So did Sheila. Vertie started with, "Well there's this berry bush, but it's kind of far into the forest. I was wondering..."©Mn~~gh~~n