

The Boy and the Dragon

Canadian Fairy Tales

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Intermediate

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Once, long ago, before the white man came to Canada, a boy was living with his parents in a village near the ocean. As he had no brothers or sisters, he was often lonely, and he longed for adventure and companionship. At last he decided to set out to seek his fortune elsewhere. He was just on the point of leaving his home when it was noised abroad one day that there had come into the land a great dragon, who was doing great havoc and damage wherever he went. The country was in great terror, for the dragon carried off women and children and devoured them one by one. And what was still more mystifying, he had the power to take on human form, and often he changed himself into a man of pleasing shape and manner and came among the people to carry out his cruel designs before they knew that he was near. The Chief of the tribe called for volunteers to meet the dragon-man, but none of his warriors responded. They were strong and mighty in combat with men, but it was a different matter to encounter a dragon.

When the youth heard this dreadful story and saw the terror of his people, he said, "Here is my chance to do a great deed," for somehow he felt that he had more than human power. So he said good-bye to his parents and set out on his adventure. He traveled all day inland through the forest, until at evening he came to a high hill in the center of an open space. He said, "I will climb this hill, and perhaps I can see all the country round about me." So he went slowly to the top.

As he stood there, looking over the country which he could see for many miles around, a man suddenly appeared beside him. He was a very pleasant fellow, and they talked together for some time. The boy was on his guard, but he thought, "Surely this man with the good looks cannot be the dragon," and he laughed at his suspicions and put them from his mind.

The stranger said, "Where are you going?"

And the boy answered, "I am going far away. I am seeking adventure in the forest for it is very lonely down by the sea." But he did not tell him of his real errand.

"You may stay with me tonight," said the newcomer. "I have a very comfortable lodge not far from here, and I will give you food." The boy was very hungry and tired, and he went along with the man to his lodge. When they reached the house the boy was surprised to see a great heap of bleached bones lying before the door. But he showed no fear, nor did he comment on the horrible sight. Inside the lodge sat a very old and bent woman, tending a pot. She was stirring it with a big stick, and the boy saw that it contained meat stew. When she placed the stew before them, the boy said he would rather have corn, for he feared to taste the meat. The old woman fried some corn for him, and he had a good meal.

After they had eaten, the man went out to gather wood for the fire, and the boy sat talking to the old woman. And she said to him, "You are very young and beautiful and innocent—the most handsome I have yet seen in this place. And because of that, I will take pity on you and warn you of your danger. The man whom you met in the forest and whom you dined with tonight is none other than the dragon-man of whom you have often heard. He cannot be killed in ordinary combat, and it would be folly for you to try. Tomorrow he will kill you if you are still here. Take these moccasins that I will give you, and in the morning when you get up put them on your feet. With one step you will reach by their power the hill you see in the distance. Give this piece of birch bark with the picture on it to a man you will meet there, and he will tell you what next to do. But remember that no matter how far you go, the dragon-man will overtake you in the evening."

The youth took the moccasins and the birch bark bearing the mystic sign and hid them under his coat, and said, "I will do as you advise."

But the woman said, "There is one more condition. You must kill me in the morning before you go, and put this

robe over my body. Then the dragon-man's spell over me will be broken, and when he leaves me, I will rouse myself with my power back to life."

The youth went to sleep, and the dragon-man slept all night beside him so as not to let him escape. The next morning, when the dragon-man was out to get water from the stream some distance away, the boy at once carried out the old woman's orders of the night before. First of all, he killed the old woman with a blow and covered her body with a bright cloak, for he knew that when the dragon-man would leave the place she would soon rise again. Then he put the magic moccasins on his feet and with one great step he reached the distant hill. Here, sure enough, he met an old man. He gave him the piece of birch bark bearing the mystic sign.

The man looked at it closely and smiled and said, "So it is you I was told to wait for. That is well, for you are indeed a comely youth." The man gave him another pair of moccasins in exchange for those he was wearing, and another piece of birch bark bearing another inscription. He pointed to a hill that rose blue in the distance and said, "With one step you will reach that hill. Give this bark to a man you will meet there, and all will be well."

The boy put the moccasins on his feet, and with one step he reached the distant hill. There he met another old man, to whom he gave the birch bark. This man gave him another pair of moccasins and a large maple leaf bearing a strange symbol, and told him to go to another spot, where he would receive final instructions. He did as he was told, and here he met a very old man, who said, "Down yonder there is a stream. Go towards it and walk straight into it, as if you were on dry ground. But do not look at the water. Take this piece of birch bark bearing these magic figures, and it will change you into whatever you wish, and it will keep you from harm."

The boy took the bark and did as he was told, and soon found himself on the opposite bank of the stream. He followed the stream for some distance, and at evening he came to a lake. As he was looking about for a warm place to pass the night, he suddenly came upon the dragon-man, now in the form of a monster dragon, hiding behind the trees. The old woman's words had come true, for his enemy had overtaken him before nightfall, as she had said. There was no time to lose, so the boy waved his magic bark, and at once he became a little fish with red fins, moving slowly in the lake.

When the dragon-man saw the little fish, he cried, "Little fish with the red fins, have you seen the youth I am looking for?"

"No, sir," said the little fish, "I have seen no one; I have been asleep. But if he passes this way I will tell you," and he moved rapidly out into the lake.

The dragon-man moved down along the bank of the lake, while the youth watched him from the water. He met a Toad in the path, and said, "Little Toad, have you seen the youth I am looking for? If he passed this way you would surely have seen him."

"I am minding my own business," answered the Toad, and he hopped away into the moss. Then the dragon-man saw a very large fish with his head above water, looking for flies, and he said, "Have you seen the boy I am looking for?"

"Yes," said the fish, "you have just been talking to him," and he laughed to himself and disappeared. The dragon-man went back and searched everywhere for Toad, but he could not find him. As he looked he came upon a musk-rat running along by the stream, and he said angrily, "Have you seen the person I am looking for?"

"No," said the rat.

"I think you are he," said the dragon-man.

Then the musk-rat began to cry bitterly and said, "No, no; the boy you are looking for passed by just now, and he stepped on the roof of my house and broke it in." The dragon-man was deceived again. He went on and soon came upon old Turtle splashing around in the mud.

"You are very old and wise," he said, hoping to flatter him, "you have surely seen the person I am looking for."

"Yes," said Turtle, "he is farther down the stream. Go across the river and you will find him. But beware, for if you do not know him when you see him, he will surely kill you." Turtle knew well that the dragon-man would now meet his fate.

The dragon-man followed the lake till he came to the river. For greater caution, so that he might be less easily seen, he changed himself to a Snake. Then he attempted to cross the stream. But the youth, still in the form of

a fish and still using the power of his magic bark with the mystic sign, was swimming round and round in a circle in the middle of the river. A rapid whirlpool arose where he swam, but it was not visible on the surface. As the Snake approached it, he saw nothing but clear water. He failed to recognize his enemy, and as Turtle had told him, he swam into the whirlpool before he was aware of it, and was quickly drawn to the bottom, where he was drowned.

The youth fished him up and cut off his head. Then he changed back to his own form. He went to the dragon-man's lodge to see how the old woman had fared, but she had gone with her bright robe, and the lodge was empty. Then the youth went back to his home and reported what he had done. And he received many rich gifts from the Chief for his brave deed, and the land was never troubled again by dragons. But from that time the snake family was hated because its shape had concealed the dragon-man, and to this day an Indian will not let a snake escape with his life if he meets one of them in his path. For they still are mindful of the adventure of their ancestor in the old days, and they are suspicious of the evil power the snake family secretly possess.

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