

The Boy in the Land of Shadows

Canadian Fairy Tales

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Intermediate
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Two orphan children, a boy and a girl, lived alone near the mountains. Their parents had long been dead and the children were left to look after themselves without any kindred upon the earth. The boy hunted all day long and provided much food, and the girl kept the house in order and did the cooking. They had a very deep love for each other and as they grew up they said, "We shall never leave each other. We shall always stay here together."

But one year it happened that in the early spring time it was very cold. The snow lingered on the plains and the ice moved slowly from the rivers and chill winds were always blowing and grey vapors hovered over all the land. And there was very little food to be had, for the animals hid in their warm winter dens and the wild-geese and ducks were still far south. And in this cruel period of bad weather the little girl sickened and died. Her brother worked hard to provide her with nourishing food and he gathered all the medicine roots he thought could bring her relief, but it was all to no purpose. And despite all his efforts, one evening in the twilight his sister went away to the West, leaving him alone behind upon the earth.

The boy was heart-broken because of his sister's death. And when the late spring came and the days grew warm and food was plentiful again, he said, "She must be somewhere in the West, for they say that our people do not really die. I will go and search for her, and perhaps I can find her and bring her back." So one morning he set out on his strange quest. He journeyed many days westward towards the Great Water, killing game for food as he went, and sleeping at night under the stars. He met many strange people, but he did not tell them the

purpose of his travels. At last he came to the shore of the Great Water, and he sat looking towards the sunset wondering what next to do. In the evening an old man came along.

“What are you doing here?” asked the man. “I am looking for my sister,” said the boy; “some time ago she became sick and died. I am lonely without her, and I want to find her and bring her back.” And the man said, “Some time ago, she whom you seek passed this way. If you wish to find her you must undertake a dangerous journey.” The boy answered that he would gladly risk any dangers to find his sister, and the old man said, “I will help you. Your sister has gone to the Land of Shadows far away in the Country of Silence, which lies out yonder in the Island of the Blest. To reach the Island you must sail far into the West, but I warn you that it is a perilous journey, for the crossing is always rough and your boat will be tossed by tempests. But you will be well repaid for your trouble, for in that land nobody is ever hungry or tired; there is no death and no sorrow; there are no tears, and no one ever grows old.”

Then the old man gave the boy a large pipe and some tobacco and said, “This will help you in your need.” And he brought him to where a small canoe lay dry upon the beach. It was a wonderful canoe, the most beautiful the boy had ever seen. It was cut from a single white stone and it sparkled in the red twilight like a polished jewel. And the old man said, “This canoe will weather all storms. But see that you handle it carefully, and when you come back see that you leave it in the cove where you found it.”

Soon afterwards, the boy set out on his journey. The moon was full and the night was cold with stars. He sailed into the West over a rough and angry sea, but he was in no danger, for his canoe rode easily on the waters. All around him he saw in the moonlight many other canoes going in the same direction and all white and shining like his own. But no one seemed to be guiding them, and although he looked long at them not a person could he make out. He wondered if the canoes were drifting unoccupied, for when he called to them there was no answer. Sometimes a canoe upset in the tossing sea and the waves rose over it and it was seen no more, and the boy often thought he heard an anguished cry. For several days he sailed on to the West, and all the time other canoes were not far away, and all the time some of them were dropping from sight beneath the surging waters, but he saw no people in them.

At last, after a long journey, the sea grew calm and the air was sweet and warm. There was no trace of the storm, for the waves were quiet and the sky was as clear as crystal. He saw that he was near the Island of the

Blest of which the old man had spoken, for it was now plain to his view, as it rose above the ocean, topped with green grass and trees, and a snow-white beach. Soon he reached the shore and drew up his canoe. As he turned away, he came upon a skeleton lying flat upon the sand. He stopped to look at it, and as he did so, the skeleton sat up and said in great surprise, "You should not be here. Why have you come?"

And the boy said, "I seek my sister. In the early springtime she became sick and died, and I am going to the Land of Shadows in the Country of Silence in search of her." "You must go far inland," said the skeleton, "and the way is hard to find for such as you." The boy asked for guidance and the skeleton said, "Let me smoke and I will help you." The boy gave him the pipe and the tobacco he had received from the old man, and he laughed when he saw his strange companion with the pipe between his teeth. The skeleton smoked for some time and at last, as the smoke rose from his pipe, it changed to a flock of little white birds, which flew about like doves. The boy looked on in wonder, and the skeleton said, "These birds will guide you. Follow them." Then he gave back the pipe and stretched out again flat upon the sand, and the boy could not rouse him from his sleep.

The boy followed the little white birds as he had been told. He went along through a land of great beauty where flowers were blooming and countless birds were singing. Not a person did he meet on the way. The place was deserted except for the song-birds and the flowers. He passed through the Country of Silence, and came to a mysterious land where no one dwelt. But although he saw no one he heard many voices and he could not tell whence they came. They seemed to be all around him. At last the birds stopped at the entrance to a great garden, and flew around his head in a circle. They would go no further and they alighted on a tree close by, all except one, which perched on the boy's shoulder. The lad knew that here at last was the Land of Shadows.

When he entered the garden he heard again many low voices. But he saw no one. He saw only many shadows of people on the grass, but he could not see from what the shadows came. He wondered greatly at the strange and unusual sight, for back in his homeland in that time the sunlight made no shadows. He listened again to the voices and he knew now that the shadows were speaking. He wandered about for some time marvelling greatly at the strange place with its weird unearthly beauty. At last he heard a voice which he knew to be his sister's. It was soft and sweet, just as he had known it when they were together on the earth, and it had not changed since she left him.

He went to the shadow from which the voice came, and throwing himself on the grass beside it, he said, "I have

long sought you, my sister. I have come to take you home. Let me see you as you were when we dwelt together." But his sister said, "You have done wisely to keep me in your memory, and to seek to find me. But here we cannot appear to the people of earth except as shadows. I cannot go back with you, for it is now too late. I have eaten of the food of this land; if you had come before I had eaten, perhaps you could have taken me away. Who knows? But my heart and my voice are unchanged, and I still remember my dear ones, and with unaltered love I still watch my old home. And although I cannot go to you, you can some day come to me. First, you must finish your work on earth. Go back to your home in the Earth Country. You will become a great Chief among your people. Rule wisely and justly and well, and give freely of your food to the poor among the Indians who do not have as much as you have. And when your work on earth is done, you shall come to me in this Land of Shadows beyond the Country of Silence, and we shall be together again and our youth and strength and beauty will never leave us."

And the boy, wondering greatly and in deep sorrow, said, "Let me stay with you now." But his sister said, "That cannot be." Then she said, "I will give you a Shadow, which you must keep with you as your guardian spirit. And while you have it with you, no harm can come to you, for it will be present only in the Light, and where there is Light, there can be no wickedness. But when it disappears you must be on your guard against doing evil, for then there will be darkness, and darkness may lead you to wrong."

So the boy took the Shadow, and said good-bye for a season and set out on his homeward journey. The little white birds, which had waited for him in the trees, guided him back to the beach. His canoe was still there, but the skeleton-man had gone and there was not a trace of him to be found upon the sand. And the Island of the Blest was silent except for the songs of the birds and the ripple of the little streams. The boy embarked in his canoe and sailed towards the east, and as he pushed off from the beach the little white birds left him and disappeared in the air. The sea was now calm and there was no storm, as there had been on his outward journey. Soon he reached the shore on the other side. He left his canoe in the cove as the old man had told him, and in a few days he arrived at his home, still bearing the Shadow from the Country of Silence.

He worked hard for many years but he did no evil, and in the end he became a great Chief and did much good for his people. He ruled wisely and justly and well, as his sister had commanded him. Then one day, when he was old and his work was done, he disappeared, and his people knew that he had gone to join his sister in the Land of Shadows in the Country of Silence far away somewhere in the West. But he left behind him the

Shadow his sister had given him; and while there is Light, the Indians still have their Shadow and no harm can come to them, for where there is Light, there can be no evil.

But always in the late autumn the Shadows of the Indian brother and sister in the Country of Silence are lonely for their former life. And they think of their living friends and of the places of their youth, and they wish once more to follow the hunt, for they know that the hunter's moon is shining. And when their memory dwells with longing on their earlier days, their spirits are allowed to come back to earth for a brief season from the Land of Shadows. Then the winds are silent and the days are very still, and the smoke of their camp fires appears like haze upon the air. And men call this season Indian Summer, but it is really but a Shadow of the golden summer that has gone. And it always is a reminder to the Indians that in the Land of Shadows, far away in the Country of Silence in the West, there are no dead.

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