

The Boy Who Was Saved by Thoughts

Canadian Fairy Tales

Canadian Native American North American

*Intermediate
9 min read*

A poor widow woman once lived near the sea in Eastern Canada. Her husband had been drowned catching fish one stormy day far off the coast, and her little boy was now her only means of support. He had no brothers or sisters, and he and his mother, because they lived alone, were always good comrades. Although he was very young and small, he was very strong, and he could catch fish and game like a man. Every day he brought home food to his mother, and they were never went without a meal.

Now it happened that the Great Eagle who made the Winds in these parts became very angry because he was not given enough to eat. He went screaming through the land in search of food, but no food could he find. And he said, "If the people will not give me food, I will take care that they get no food for themselves, and when I grow very hungry I shall eat up all the little children in the land. For my young ones must have nourishment too." So he tossed the waters about with the wind of his great wings, and he bent the trees and flattened the corn, and for days he made such activity on the earth that the people stayed indoors, and they were afraid to come out in search of food.

At last the boy and his mother became very hungry. And the boy said, "I must go and find food, since there is not a crumb left in the house. We cannot wait longer." And he said to his mother, "I know where a fat young

beaver lives in his house of reeds on the bank of the stream near the sea. I shall go and kill him, and his flesh will feed us for many days." His mother did not want him to make this hazardous journey, for the Great Eagle was still in the land.

But he said to her, "You must think of me always when I am gone, and I will think of you, and while we keep each other in our memories I shall come to no harm." So, taking his long hunting knife, he set out for the beaver's home in his house of reeds on the bank of the stream near the sea. He reached the place without mishap and there he found Beaver fast asleep. He soon killed him and slung him over his shoulder and started back to his mother's house. "A good fat load I have here," he said to himself, "and we shall now have many a good dinner of roast beaver-meat."

But as he went along with his load on his back, the Great Eagle spied him from a distance and swooped down upon him without warning. Before he could strike with his knife, the Eagle caught him by the shoulders and soared away, holding him in a mighty grip with the beaver still on his back. The boy tried to plunge his knife into the Eagle's breast, but the feathers were too thick and tough, and he was not strong enough to drive the knife through them. He could do nothing but make the best of his sorry plight. "Surely I can think of a way of escape," he said to himself, "and my mother's thoughts will be with me to help me."

Soon the Eagle arrived at his home. It was built on a high cliff overlooking the sea, hundreds of feet above the beach, where even the sound of the surf rolling in from afar could not reach it. There were many young birds in the nest, all clamoring for food. Great Eagle threw the boy to the side of the nest and told him to stay there. And he said, "I shall first eat the beaver, and after he is all eaten up, we shall have a good fat meal from you." Then he picked the beaver to pieces and fed part of it to his young ones.

For some days the boy lay in terror in the nest, trying to think of a way of escape. Birds flew high over his head, and far out on the ocean, he could see great ships going by. But no help came to him, and he thought that death would soon be upon him. And his mother sat at home waiting for him to return, but day after day passed and still he did not come. She thought he must surely be in great danger, or that perhaps he was already dead. One day, as she was weeping, thinking of her lost boy, an old woman came along. "Why do you cry?" she asked.

And the weeping woman said, "My boy has been away for many days. I know that harm has come upon him. The men of my tribe have gone in search of him, and they will kill whatever holds him a prisoner, but I fear he will never come back alive." And the old woman said, "Little good the men of your tribe can do you! You must

aid him with your thoughts, for material things are vain. I will help you, for I have been given great power by the Little People of the Hills.” So the woman used her thoughts and her wishes to bring back her boy.

That night the boy noticed that the beaver had all been eaten up and that not a morsel remained. He knew that unless he could save himself at once he would surely die on the morrow. The Great Eagle, he knew, would swoop down upon him and kill him with a blow of his powerful beak and claws. But when the boy slept, he saw his mother in his slumber. And she said to him, “Tomorrow when Great Eagle goes from the nest, brace your knife, point upwards, against the rock. When he swoops down to kill you his breast will strike the knife, and he will be pierced to death. You are not strong enough to cut through his feathers with your knife, but he is powerful enough to destroy himself.”

The next morning when Great Eagle went out, the boy did as the vision of the night had told him. He braced his sharp hunting-knife, point upwards, against the rock and sat still and waited. Then he heard the young eagles making a great noise and crying loudly for their breakfast. He knew that his hour had come. Soon the Great Eagle, hearing the screams of his young ones, came flying back to the nest to kill the boy. He circled around above him with loud cries and then with great force swooped down upon him, hoping to kill him with his beak and claws. But instead, he struck the blade braced upwards against the rock. The knife pierced far into his breast, and with a loud scream he rolled over dead into the nest. The boy then killed the young eagles, and he knew that now for a time he was safe.

But he did not know how to get down from the Eagle’s nest, for it jutted out like a shelf far over the beach, and behind it was a wall of rock around which he could not climb. He had no means of making a ladder, and his cries would not be heard upon the beach because of the constant roaring of the surf. He thought he would surely starve to death, and that night he cried himself to sleep. But in the night he again saw his mother in his slumbers. And she said, “You are a foolish boy. Why do you not use the thoughts I send you? Tomorrow skin the eagle and crawl inside the skin. If the wide wings can hold the Eagle in the air they can likewise hold you. Drop off from the cliff and you will land safely on the beach.”

The next day the boy did as the vision of the night had told him. He carefully skinned the Great Eagle. Then he crawled inside the skin and thrust his arms through the skin just above the wings, so that his extended arms would hold the wings straight out beneath them. Then he prepared to drop down. But when he looked over the cliff, he was very frightened, for the sight made him dizzy. On the beach, men looked like flies, they were so far away. But he remembered the promise made to him in his slumbers. So he pushed himself from the cliff and

dropped down. The wings of Great Eagle let him fall gently through the air and he landed safely and unhurt upon the beach. He crawled out of the skin and set out for his home. It was a long journey, for Great Eagle had carried him far away, but towards evening he reached his home safely, and his mother received him with great gladness.

The boy began to boast of his adventure, and he told how he had killed Great Eagle and how he had dropped down unscathed from the cliff. He spoke of himself with great pride and of his strength and his shrewdness. But the old woman from the Land of the Little People, the fairies of the hills, who was still present with his mother, said, "Oh, vain boy, do not think so highly of yourself. Your strength is nothing; your shrewdness is nothing. It was not these things that saved you, but it was the strength of our thoughts. These alone endure and succeed when all else fails. I have taught you the uselessness of all material things, which in the end are but as ashes or as dust. Our thoughts alone can help us in the end, for they alone are eternal." And the boy listened and wondered at what the old woman from the Land of Little People had said, but he boasted of his strength no more.

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