



# *Even a Grass Plant Can Become Someone If it Tries*

A Treasury Of Eskimo Tales  
North American

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*Intermediate*  
*11 min read*

Near the mouth of the Yukon grows a tall, slender kind of grass which the women gather and dry in the fall and use for braiding mats and baskets and for pads in the soles of skin boots.

One of these grass stalks that had been almost pulled out by the roots when the women were gathering others, did not like the fate in store for it.

“Why should I stay on in this shape and never become anything but a pad in the sole of a boot to be trodden on forever? It must be nicer to be the one who treads on the pad; but since I cannot be that, I will at least be something better than grass.”

Looking about, it spied a bunch of herbs growing close by, looking so quiet and unmolested that the grass stem said, “I will be an herb; that is a higher and safer life than this.”

At once it was changed into an herb like those it had envied, and for a time it remained in peace. But one day the women came back with baskets and picks and began to dig up these herbs and eat some of the roots, putting others into the baskets to take home. The changed plant was left standing when the women went home

toward evening, but it had seen the fate of its companions.

“This is not very safe either, for now I should be eaten. I wish I had chosen some other form,” it said.

Looking down, it saw a tiny, creeping vine clinging close to the ground. “That is the thing to be,” it said. “That is so obscure and lowly that the women will never notice it. I will be a vine like that.”

Without delay it became a little squawberry vine nestling under the dead leaves. It had not lived in peace and seclusion very long before the women came and tore up many of the vines, stopping just before they reached the changeling, and saying, “We will come back to-morrow and get the rest.”

The one-time grass plant was filled with fear, and changed itself quickly into a small tuber-bearing plant like some that were growing near. Scarcely had the change been made when a small tundra mouse came softly through the grass and began digging at a neighboring plant, holding up the tuber in its paws and nibbling it, after which the mouse crept on again.

“To be safe, I must be a mouse,” thought the changeling. “Animals are a higher kind of being than plants, anyway. I will be a mouse.”

Instantly it became a mouse and ran off, glad of the change. Now and then it would pause to dig up a tuber, or would sit up on its hind feet to look around on the new scenes that came into view.

“This is much more delightful than being a plant and always staying in one place and never seeing anything of the world,” it said.

While traveling nimbly along in this manner, the mouse observed a strange white animal coming through the air toward it, which kept dropping down upon the ground, and after stopping to eat something, it would fly on again.

When it came near, the mouse saw that it was a great white owl. At the same moment the owl saw the mouse and swooped down upon it. Darting off, the mouse was fortunate enough to escape by running into a hole made by one of its kind, and the owl flew off.

After a while the mouse ventured to come out of its shelter, though its heart still beat painfully from its recent

fright. "I will be an owl, and in that way be safe," thought the mouse, and with the wish it was changed into a beautiful white owl.

"Oh, this is fine!" he said. "It is glorious to fly through the air, and go up almost to the sky where I can look down on all the world. I'm glad that I was not content to stay always down in the dirt."

With slow, noiseless wing flaps the owl set off toward the north, pausing every now and then to catch and eat a mouse. After a long flight Sledge Island came in view and the owl thought it would go there. When far out at sea its untried wings became so tired that only with the greatest difficulty did it manage to reach the shore, where it perched upon a piece of driftwood that stood up in the sand.

In a short time it saw two fine-looking men pass along the shore, and the old feeling of discontent arose again. "Those men were talking in a better-sounding language than mine. They seemed to understand each other, and they laughed and were having a good time. I will be a man."

With a single flap of wing it stood upon the ground, where it changed immediately into a fine young man. But, of course, the feathers were gone and the Man had no clothing. Night came down upon the earth soon after, and the Man sat down with his back against the stick of wood on which, as an owl, he had perched, and slept till morning. He was awakened by the sun shining in his eyes, and upon arising, felt stiff and lame from the cold night air.

He found some of the same grass which he had once been, and braided it into a kind of mantle which kept out a little of the cold. Seeing a reindeer grazing, he felt a sudden desire to kill it and eat its flesh. He crept close on his hands and knees, and, springing forward, seized it by the horns and broke its neck with a single effort.

He felt all over its body and found that its skin formed a covering through which he could not push his fingers. For a long time he tried to think how to remove the skin, and finally noticed a stone with a sharp edge with which he managed to cut through the hide. Then he quickly stripped the animal with his hands, and tore out a piece of flesh which he tried to swallow as he had swallowed mice when he was an owl. He found that he could not do this easily, so he tore off small bits and ground them with his teeth.

He had already discovered that by striking two stones together they grew warm and felt good to his cold hands. So now he struck them together until sparks came with which he lighted some dry weeds and brush and had a

fire to cook his meat and to warm himself.

The next morning he killed another reindeer and the day following two more and wrapped himself in their skins from head to foot, with the raw side next his own flesh, as the animals had worn them. The skins soon dried on him and became like a part of his body.

As the nights grew colder and colder, he collected a quantity of driftwood from the shore, with which he built him a rude hut, which he found very comfortable. Walking over the hills one day he came near to a strange, black animal eating berries from the bushes. He crept up to it and grasped it by its hind legs. With an angry growl it turned to face him, showing its white teeth. He knew then that he must not let go his hold of it, so he swung it high over his head and brought it down on the ground with such force that the bear lay dead.

In skinning the bear he saw that it contained much fat, and that he might have a light in his house if he could find something that would hold the grease and yet not take fire itself. Going along the beach he found a long, flat stone with a hollow in one surface, and in this the oil remained very well, and with a lighted moss wick he found it much pleasanter to get about his house at night. The bearskin he hung up for a curtain to his door to keep out the cold wind.

In this way he lived for many days, but he was a human being now, and needed human society. He remembered the two young men he had seen on the beach when, as an owl, he sat on the post on the shore.

“Two men passed here once, and I liked them,” said he. “They may live not far from here. I should like to see someone like myself. I will go seek them.”

He went in search of people. Wandering along the coast for some distance he came to two fine new kayaks lying at the foot of a hill, and in the kayaks were spears, lines, floats, and other hunting implements. After examining these curiously, he noticed a path leading up to a hill. He followed the path and on the top of the hill he found a house with two storehouses near it and several recently killed white whales and many skulls around it.

Wishing to see the people in the house before showing himself, he went with noiseless steps into the entrance way and up to the door. Cautiously lifting one corner of the skin curtain that hung in the doorway, he looked in. Opposite the doorway was a young man sitting at work on some arrows, while a bow lay beside him. He

dropped the curtain and stood for some time in doubt as to how to proceed.

“If I enter the house he may shoot me before I have time to make known my good will,” thought he. But in the end he thought, “If I enter and say, ‘I have come, brother,’ he will not hurt me.” So, raising the curtain quickly, he entered.

The householder at once seized the bow and drew an arrow to the head just as the intruder said, “I have come, brother.” At this the bow and arrow were dropped and the young man cried out with delight, “Are you my brother? Come and sit beside me.”

This the newcomer very gladly did, and the householder showed his pleasure and asked, “Are you really my brother? I am very glad to see you, brother, for I always believed I had one somewhere, though I never could find him. Where have you lived? Have you known any parents? How did you grow up?”

“No, I have never known any parents. I never was born and never grew up. I just found myself a man standing on the seashore. There I built me a house and made myself as comfortable as I could; but I was lonely, so I came to find you.”

“I also never had any parents that I can recall. My earliest recollection was of finding myself alone in this house, where I have lived ever since, killing game for food. I was alone until this friend came to stay with me. Now you, my brother, shall live here too, and we will never be parted again.”

And thus, by always striving to be something higher, the downtrodden grass plant became a Man.

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