

Kiviung

A Treasury Of Eskimo Tales

North American

Intermediate

11 min read

An old woman lived with her grandson in a small hut. She had no husband to take care of her and the boy, and they were very poor. The lad's clothing was made of the skins of birds which they caught in snares. Whenever the boy came out of the hut to play, the other boys would call, "Here comes the bird boy! Fly away, birdie!" and the men would laugh at him and tear his clothes.

Only one man whose name was Kiv-i-ung, was kind to the boy and tried to protect him from the others, but they would not stop. The lad often came to his grandmother crying, and she would console him and promise him a new garment, as soon as they could get the skins.

She begged the men to stop teasing the child and tearing his clothes, but they only laughed at her. At last she became angry and said to the boy, "I will avenge you on your tormentors. I can do it by making use of my power to conjure."

She poured water on the mud floor and said, "Step into this puddle, and do not be frightened at anything that happens."

He stepped into it, and immediately the earth opened and he sank out of sight, but the next moment he rose near the beach and swam about as a young seal with a wonderfully smooth, shining skin.

Some one saw him and called out that there was a yearling seal close to shore. The men all ran to their kayaks eager to secure the beautiful creature. But the boy-seal swam lustily away as his grandmother had told him to do, and the men continued to pursue him. Whenever he rose to the surface to breathe, he took care to come up behind the kayaks, where he would splash and dabble in order to lure them on. As soon as he had attracted their attention and they had turned to pursue him, he would dive and come up farther out in the sea. The men were so interested in catching him that they did not observe how they were being led far out into the ocean and out of sight of the land.

It was now that the grandmother put forth her powers. Suddenly a fierce gale arose; the sea foamed and roared and the waves upset their frail vessels and plunged them under the surface. When they were drowned, the little seal changed back into a boy and walked home over the water without wetting his feet. There was no one left now to torment him.

Kiv-i-ung, who had never abused the boy, had gone out with the rest, but his kayak did not capsize. Bravely he strove against the wild waves, and drifted far away from the place where the others had gone down. There was a dense fog and he could not tell in which direction to go.

He rowed for many days not knowing whither he was going, and then one day he spied through the mists a dark mass which he took to be land. As he pulled toward it the sea became more and more tempestuous, and he saw that what he had supposed to be a rocky cliff on an island was a wild, black sea with a raging whirlpool in the midst of it.

He had come so close that it was only by the utmost exertion he escaped being drawn into the whirlpool and carried down. He put forth all his strength and at last got away where the waves were less like mountains. But he had to be constantly on the alert, for at one moment his frail craft was carried high up on the crest of billows and the next it was plunged into a deep trough of the sea.

Again he saw a dark mass looming up, and rowed toward it hoping to find land, but again he was deceived, for it was another whirlpool which made the sea rise in gigantic waves. At last the wind subsided, and the sea

became less rough, though the whitecaps still frothed around him. The fog lifted, and at a great distance he saw land, real land this time.

He went toward it, and after rowing along the coast for some distance he spied a stone house with a light in it. You may be sure he was delighted to come near a human habitation again. He landed and entered the house. There was no one in it but one old woman. She received him kindly and helped him to pull off his boots, and she hung his wet stockings on the frame above the lamp. Then she said:

“I will make a fire in the next room and cook a good supper.”

Kiviung thought she was a very good woman, and he was so hungry that he could scarcely wait for the supper. It seemed to him that she was a long time preparing it. When his stockings were dry he tried to take them from the frame in order to put them on. But as soon as he touched the frame it rose up out of his reach. He tried in vain several times, and each time the frame rose up. He called the woman in and asked her to give him his stockings.

“Take them yourself,” she said. “There they are; there they are,” and went out again.

Kiviung was surprised at the change in her manner. He tried once more to take hold of his stockings, but with no better result. Calling the woman in again, he explained his difficulty and said:

“Please hand me my boots and stockings; they slip away from me.”

“Sit down where I sat when you entered my house; then you can get them,” she replied, and left the room.

He tried once more, but the frame arose as before and he could not reach it. He knew now that she was a wicked woman, and he suspected that the big fire she had made was prepared so she could roast and eat him.

What should he do? He had seen that she could work magic. He knew that he could not escape unless he could surpass her in her own arts. He summoned his mascot, which was a huge white bear. At once there was a low growl from under the house. The woman did not hear it at first, but Kiviung kept on conjuring the spirit and it rose right up through the floor roaring loudly. Then the old witch rushed in trembling with fear and gave Kiviung what he had asked for.

“Here are your boots,” she cried; “here are your slippers; here are your stockings. I will help you put them on.”

But Kiviung would not stay any longer with the horrid creature, and dared not wait to put on his stockings and boots. He rushed out of the house and had barely gotten out of the door when it clapped violently together, catching the tail of his jacket, which was torn off. Without stopping to look behind, he ran to his kayak and paddled away.

The old woman quickly recovered from her fear and came out swinging a glittering knife which she attempted to throw at him. He was so frightened that he nearly upset his kayak, but he steadied it and arose to his feet, lifting his spear.

“I shall kill you with my spear,” he cried.

At that the old woman fell down in terror and broke her knife which she had made by magic out of a thin slab of ice.

He traveled on for many days, always keeping near the shore. At last he came to another hut, and again a lamp was burning inside. His clothing was wet and he was hungry, so he landed and went into the house. There he found something very strange: a woman living all alone with her daughter! Yet the daughter was married and they kept the son-in-law in the house. But he was a log of driftwood which they had found on the beach. It had four branches like legs and arms. Every day about the time of low water they carried it to the beach and when the tide came in, it swam away. When night came it returned with eight large seals, two being fastened to each bough.

Thus the log provided food for its wife, her mother, and Kiviung, and they lived in abundance. Kiviung became rested and refreshed after his weary travels, and he enjoyed this life so well that he remained for a long time. One day, however, after they had launched the log as they had always done, it floated away and never came back.

Then Kiviung went sealing every day for himself and the women, and he was so successful that they wished him to remain with them always. But he had not forgotten the home he had left long ago, and meant to return to it. He was anxious to lay in a good stock of mittens to keep his hands warm on the long journey, and each

night he pretended to have lost the pair he wore, and the women would make him another pair from the skin of the seals he brought home. He hid them all in the hood of his jacket.

Then one day, he, too, floated off with the tide and never came back. He rowed on for many days and nights, always following the shore. During the terrible storm he had been out of sight of land all he ever cared to be.

At last he came again to a hut where a lamp was burning, and went to it. But this time he thought it would be well to see who was inside before entering. He therefore climbed up to the window and looked through the peep-hole. On the bed sat a woman whose head and whose hands looked like big yellow-and-black spiders. She was sewing; and when she saw the dark shadow before the window she at first thought it was a cloud, but when she looked up and beheld a man, she grasped a big knife and arose, looking very angry. Kiviung waited to see no more. He felt a sudden longing for home, and hastily went on his way.

Again he traveled for days and nights. At last he came to a land which seemed familiar, and as he went farther he recognized his own country. He was very glad to see some boats ahead of him, and when he stood up and waved and shouted to them they came to meet him. They had been on a whaling excursion and were towing a large dead whale to their village.

In the bow of one of the boats stood a stout young man who had harpooned the whale. He looked at Kiviung keenly and Kiviung looked at him. Then, of a sudden, they recognized each other. It was Kiviung's own son whom he had left a small boy, but who was now become a grown man and a great hunter.

Kiviung's wife was delighted to see him whom she had supposed dead. At first she seemed glad and then she seemed troubled. She had taken a new husband, but after thinking it over she returned to Kiviung, and they were very happy.

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