



Old Man and the Fox

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Native Americannorth American

Intermediate

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I am sure that the plains Indian never made nor used the stone arrow-head. I have heard white men say that they had seen Indians use them; but I have never found an Indian that ever used them himself, or knew of their having been used by his people. Thirty years ago I knew Indians, intimately, who were nearly a hundred years old, who told me that the stone arrow-head had never been in use in their day, nor had their fathers used them in their own time. Indians find these arrow-points just as they find the stone mauls and hammers, which I have seen them use thousands of times, but they do not make them any more than they make the stone mauls and hammers. In the old days, both the head of the lance and the point of the arrow were of bone; even knives were of bone, but some other people surely made the arrow-points that are scattered throughout the United States and Europe, I am told.

One night I asked War Eagle if he had ever known the use, by Indians, of the stone arrow-head, and he said he had not. He told me that just across the Canadian line there was a small lake, surrounded by trees, wherein there was an island covered with long reeds and grass. All about the edge of this island were willows that grew nearly to the water, but intervening there was a narrow beach of stones. Here, he said, the stone arrow-heads had been made by little ghost-people who lived there, and he assured me that he had often seen these strange little beings when he was a small boy. Whenever his people were camped by this lake the old folks waked the children at daybreak to see the inhabitants of this strange island; and always when a noise was made, or the

sun came up, the little people hid away. Often he had seen their heads above the grass and tiny willows, and his grandfather had told him that all the stone arrow-heads had been made on that island, and in war had been shot all over the world, by magic bows.

“No,” he said, “I shall not lie to you, my friend. I never saw those little people shoot an arrow, but there are so many arrows there, and so many pieces of broken ones, that it proves that my grandfather was right in what he told me. Besides, nobody could ever sleep on that island.”

I have heard a legend wherein OLD-man, in the beginning, killed an animal for the people to eat, and then instructed them to use the ribs of the dead brute to make knives and arrow-points. I have seen lance-heads, made from shank bones, that were so highly polished that they resembled pearl, and I have in my possession bone arrow-points such as were used long ago. Indians do not readily forget their tribal history, and I have photographed a war-bonnet, made of twisted buffalo hair, that was manufactured before the present owner's people had, or ever saw, the horse. The owner of this bonnet has told me that the stone arrow-head was never used by Indians, and that he knew that ghost-people made and used them when the world was young.

The bow of the plains Indian was from thirty-six to forty-four inches long, and made from the wood of the choke-cherry tree. Sometimes bows were made from the service (or sarvice) berry bush, and this bush furnished the best material for arrows. I have seen hickory bows among the plains Indians, too, and these were longer and always straight, instead of being fashioned like Cupid's weapon. These hickory bows came from the East, of course, and through trading, reached the plains country. I have also seen bows covered with the skins of the bull-snake, or wound with sinew, and bows have been made from the horns of the elk, in the early days, after a long course of preparation.

Before Lewis and Clark crossed this vast country, the Blackfeet had traded with the Hudson Bay Company, and steel knives and lance-heads, bearing the names of English makers, still remain to testify to the relations existing, in those days, between those famous traders and men of the Piegan, Blood, and Blackfoot tribes, although it took many years for traders on our own side of the line to gain their friendship. Indeed, trappers and traders blamed the Hudson Bay Company for the feeling of hatred held by the three tribes of Blackfeet for the “Americans”; and there is no doubt that they were right to some extent, although the killing of the Blackfoot warrior by Captain Lewis in 1805 may have been largely to blame for the trouble. Certain it is that for many

years after the killing, the Blackfeet kept traders and trappers on the dodge unless they were Hudson Bay men, and in 1810 drove the “American” trappers and traders from their fort at Three-Forks.

It was early when we gathered in War Eagle’s lodge, the children and I, but the story-telling began at once.

“Now I shall tell you a story that will show you how little OLD-man cared for the welfare of others,” said War Eagle.

“It happened in the fall, this thing I shall tell you, and the day was warm and bright. OLD-man and his brother the Red Fox were travelling together for company. They were on a hillside when OLD-Man said: ‘I am hungry. Can you not kill a Rabbit or something for us to eat? The way is long, and I am getting old, you know. You are swift of foot and cunning, and there are Rabbits among these rocks.’

“Ever since morning came I have watched for food, but the moon must be wrong or something, for I see nothing that is good to eat,’ replied the Fox. ‘Besides that, my medicine is bad and my heart is weak. You are great, and I have heard you can do most anything. Many snows have known your footprints, and the snows make us all wise. I think you are the one to help, not I.’

“Listen, brother,’ said OLD-man, ‘I have neither bow nor lance—nothing to use in hunting. Your weapons are ever with you—your great nose and your sharp teeth. Just as we came up this hill I saw two great Buffalo-Bulls. You were not looking, but I saw them, and if you will do as I want you to we shall have plenty of meat. This is my scheme; I shall pull out all of your hair, leaving your body white and smooth, like that of the fish. I shall leave only the white hair that grows on the tip of your tail, and that will make you funny to look at. Then you are to go before the Bulls and commence to dance and act foolish. Of course the Bulls will laugh at you, and as soon as they get to laughing you must act sillier than ever. That will make them laugh so hard that they will fall down and laugh on the ground. When they fall, I shall come upon them with my knife and kill them. Will you do as I suggest, brother, or will you starve?’

“What! Pull out my hair? I shall freeze with no hair on my body, OLD-man. No—I will not suffer you to pull my hair out when the winter is so near,’ cried the Fox.

“Ho! It is vanity, my brother, not fear of freezing. If you will do this we shall have meat for the winter, and a fire to keep us warm. See, the wind is in the south and warm. There is no danger of freezing. Come, let me do

it,' replied OLD-man.

“Well—if you are sure that I won’t freeze, all right,’ said the Fox, ‘but I’ll bet I’ll be sorry.’

“So Old-man pulled out all of the Fox’s hair, leaving only the white tip that grew near the end of his tail. Poor little Red Fox shivered in the warm breeze that OLD-man told about, and kept telling OLD-man that the hair-pulling hurt badly. Finally OLD-man finished the job and laughed at the Fox, saying: ‘Why, you make me laugh, too. Now go and dance before the Bulls, and I shall watch and be ready for my part of the scheme.’

“Around the hill went the poor Red Fox and found the Bulls. Then he began to dance before them as OLD-man had told him. The Bulls took one look at the hairless Fox and began to laugh. My! How they did laugh, and then the Red Fox stood upon his hind legs and danced some more; acted sillier, as OLD-man had told him. Louder and louder laughed the Bulls, until they fell to the ground with their breath short from the laughing. The Red Fox kept at his antics lest the Bulls get up before OLD-man reached them; but soon he saw him coming, with a knife in his hand.

“Running up to the Bulls, OLD-man plunged his knife into their hearts, and they died. Into the ground ran their blood, and then OLD-man laughed and said: ‘Ho, I am the smart one. I am the real hunter. I depend on my head for meat—ha!—ha!-ha!’

“Then OLD-man began to dress and skin the Bulls, and he worked hard and long. In fact it was nearly night when he got the work all done.

“Poor little Red Fox had stood there all the time, and OLD-man never noticed that the wind had changed and was coming from the north. Yes, poor Red Fox stood there and spoke no word; said nothing at all, even when OLD-man had finished.

“Hi, there, you! what’s the matter with you? Are you sorry that we have meat? Say, answer me!’

“But the Red Fox was frozen stiff—was dead. Yes, the north wind had killed him while OLD-man worked at the skinning. The Fox had been caught by the north wind naked, and was dead. OLD-man built a fire and warmed his hands; that was all he cared for the Red Fox, and that is all he cared for anybody. He might have known that no person could stand the north wind without a robe; but as long as he was warm himself—that was all he

wanted.

“That is all of that story. To-morrow night I shall tell you why the birch-tree wears those slashes in its bark. That was some of OLD-man’s work, too. Ho!”

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