

Rabbit and the Indian Chief

Canadian Fairy Tales

Canadian Native American North American

Intermediate

17 min read

Long ago an Indian Chief was living with his people far in the Canadian forest. Life was good and food was plentiful and the people were all very happy. But one day a wicked giant and his old witch wife came crashing into the land from a far country beyond the prairies. They devoured all the food they could lay their hands on and soon there was little left to eat in all the country; and often they carried off little children to their hiding-place and ate them up until not a trace of them remained. Somewhere far in the forest they dwelt in a hidden cave; they slept all day long, but at night they always stalked forth in search of plunder. The Chief was much troubled, and with his warriors he tried in every way to discover their hiding-place, but no one ever succeeded in finding it. For by the use of their magic power the giant and his old witch wife could make themselves invisible when they walked abroad among men and they could not be caught. The Chief called all his warriors to a council, and he said, "Who can rid me of this pest? Who can kill the giant?" But not a man replied. And when he saw his people's store of food rapidly growing smaller and the little children of his tribe slowly disappearing, he was greatly puzzled as to what he should do.

One night of bright moonlight Rabbit was prowling through the woods, as was his custom, in search of someone on who he could play a prank on, for he was a great joker. Suddenly he came upon the giant and his old witch wife standing by an opening in the side of a low mountain. He watched them for a long time from the shadow of a great tree, and at last he saw them enter a large hole in the side of the hill. He knew now that he

had hit by accident upon the giant's cave and he was well pleased by his discovery. But he kept his secret to himself, for he thought, "Here is a good chance for me to win fame. I will kill the giants by a crafty trick and I will then be looked upon as a great warrior, the foremost in all the land, for all the Chief's men have failed to find the giants."

So he went to the Chief and said, "Oh, Chief, I know where the giants live and I swear to you that I am going to kill them. It is I alone who can rid you of these pests."

"You!" said the Chief in great surprise; "little harm the like of you can do to giants; they will eat you up in one mouthful," and he laughed loudly at Rabbit's boldness. And he called to his warriors saying, "See what a stout fighter we have here! Little Rabbit says he can do what we have failed to do; he swears that he will kill the giants; he is better fitted to kill a mouse!" And they all laughed loud haw-haws at Rabbit's vanity.

Poor Rabbit's pride was deeply hurt by the Chief's scorn and the warriors' cruel laughter, but it all made him more determined than ever to slay the thieving giants. So he went to an old woman who lived nearby and said, "Give me an old faded dress and a ragged old shawl and your colored spectacles and a hat with a feather in it." The old woman wondered what tricks he was up to now, but she gave him what he asked for. He put on the tattered old dress and the battered old hat with a red feather sticking from the top, and he wrapped the old shawl about his face, and he wore the woman's colored spectacles and he carried a crooked stick. And dressed in this fashion, he set out towards evening for the giants' home. When he reached the mouth of the cave, he stood still and waited, leaning on his crooked stick, for night was coming on and he knew that the giants would soon be going out on their plundering rounds.

After a time when it was quite dark except for the moonlight, the giant's old witch wife came out of the cave. When she saw Rabbit in the dim light she said gruffly, "Who are you, standing there in the shadows?"

"Oh, my dear niece," said Rabbit, "I have found you at last. I am your poor old aunt. I thought I had lost my way. I have come to see you from your home in the far country. It was a long journey and my poor old legs and back are stiff and sore, and I am very hungry and tired;" and he moved slowly towards the woman, hobbling along with his crooked stick. The giant woman was deceived, and she threw her arms around Rabbit and kissed him, and she did not feel his whiskers or his split lip because of the old shawl that was wrapped around his face. "I have a pain in my jaw from sleeping out of doors," said Rabbit, "and I must keep my face wrapped

up.”

“Come in and rest, and you will soon feel better,” said the giant woman.

“You will have to lead me in,” said Rabbit, not wishing to take off the shawl, “for my eyesight is very bad.”

So she led Rabbit into the warm cave, which was so dark that they could scarcely see each other, and she called her husband and said, “Here is my dear old aunt who has come all the way from the far country beyond the prairies.” And the giant, believing Rabbit to be his wife’s kindred, for he could not see him very clearly, treated him very kindly. And they showed him the bed where he was to sleep.

The woman then gave Rabbit a large piece of dried meat to eat. But Rabbit said, “I cannot eat it, for I am old and I have lost all my teeth. Give me an axe to cut it up small.” So the woman brought him a sharp axe and he chopped the meat into small pieces and ate it all up. And he said, “I will keep the axe by me, for I shall need it at all my meals,” and he placed it beside his bed. The giant said, “We are going away to see some friends, but we shall be back before midnight.” But before they went away Rabbit said to the woman, “I hope your husband sleeps soundly; I have a bad cough and I sometimes moan because of the pain in my face and head and I do not wish to disturb him.”

And the old giant woman answered, “He slumbers too well. When we sleep we both snore loudly, and when you hear us snoring you may cough as much as you please, for then you will know that we are sound asleep.” Then the man and his witch wife went away.

When the giants came home, Rabbit pretended to be fast asleep. They brought back with them much food which they hid in a secret place at the side of the cave. Rabbit watched them through the holes in the old shawl around his head. Soon they went to bed, drowsy after their fat meal. When Rabbit heard them snoring loudly like a great waterfall, “chr-r-r, chr-r-r,” he arose very quietly and crept softly to their bedside. With two blows of his axe he killed the giant and his wife, one after the other. Then he ran away as fast as he could, carrying with him his old dress and hat and shawl, for he thought he might need them again.

In the morning he went to the Chief’s house and told the Chief what he had done. The Chief laughed scornfully and he would not believe it until Rabbit brought him to the cave and showed him the slain giants cold and stiff in their bed. The Chief’s men then took back to the village the great store of food the giants had hidden in the

secret place. But the Chief and his warriors, although they were glad to be rid of the thieves, were angry at heart because Rabbit whom they had laughed at had done what they had failed to do, for they were very jealous of Rabbit's power.

One day soon afterwards the Chief called all the birds and the animals to a council, and he said, "Now that the giants who robbed us of our food are dead and gone, and that we shall never again want for nourishment in my country, I am going to let each animal and bird choose the kind of food he would most like to live on if he could get it. And they shall never want for that kind of food if it can be provided." And he called on each to make the choice.

And the birds said "Grain and seeds and worms," and the Squirrel said "Nuts," and the Fox said "Chickens," and the cat said "Milk," and the dog said "Meat and bones," and the weasel said "Eggs," and the wolf said "Lambs," and the bear said "Fish from the frozen sea," and so on until each animal was called upon and declared his liking.

And the Chief said, "It shall be as you have chosen." But the Chief had purposely neglected to summon poor Rabbit to the council, and Rabbit was absent on a long journey. When he came home, he was very angry when he heard what had happened, for only the leftover in the world's food remained for him to choose.

So he went to the Chief and said in great wrath, "This is a fine return for ridding your land of giants. But that is a way you have; you always reward good deeds with evil."

The Chief was very angry because of Rabbit's insolence, and he said, "You are telling lies again." But Rabbit called as witnesses to the truth of what he said Sheep and Goat and Duck who chanced to be passing by and who stood listening to the quarrel.

And old Sheep said, "Rabbit has spoken truly. When I was young I gave the Chief much wool to make clothes for his back and he used me well. But now that I am old he is going to kill me and eat me up. That is my reward."

And old Goat said, "Rabbit has spoken wisely and justly. I served the Chief well in my time and gave him milk, but now that I am old and have no more milk he is fattening me and getting me ready for slaughter. That is my reward."

And old Duck said, "That is a true saying of Rabbit. Once upon a time I gave the Chief many eggs and young ducklings, but now that I have stopped laying he is soon going to roast me in a pot. That is my reward."

The Chief could make no answer to these charges, for he knew them to be true, and he offered to do what was in his power for Rabbit. But Rabbit refused to make choice of food, for he said the best was already gone. He sulked for many months and lived alone by his own efforts as best he could.

At last he decided to take vengeance on the Chief. And he hit, as was his custom, on a crafty trick. The Chief had an old Bear which he prized very highly, for the Bear did for him many wondrous tricks and brought laughter to him and his warriors when he danced at their feasts. In those olden times Bear had a long bushy tail of which he was very proud. One day as Rabbit sat on the ice fishing—for it was now winter—Bear came along. There was to be a feast that night and he was going to dance for the Chief, and he was in very good spirits. "Where did you get all the fine fish?" he asked, for he was a great fish eater.

"I caught them through the hole in the ice," said Rabbit. "It is very easy. Just drop your tail down through the hole and it will soon be covered with fine big fish."

Bear did as he was told, and he sat on the ice for a long time waiting for his prey. He sat so long that the hole froze up, for it was very cold, and in it was frozen poor Bear's long bushy tail. "Now," said Rabbit, "jump quick, for many fish are hanging to you." Bear jumped with all his might, but his tail was held fast in the ice and it broke off close to the root. Rabbit laughed in great glee and ran away. And poor Bear howled with pain and shame. He could not dance at the feast because his stub of a tail was sore, and the Chief and the warriors were very angry at Rabbit because he had harmed their dancing pet. And since that time Bear has had a short stubby tail which to this day he tries to wag feebly.

Rabbit then hid for some days far from the Chief and his warriors. Then he decided to try another trick. The Chief's wood-cutter was old Beaver, who lived in a little house of reeds on the bank of a stream. He was very busy now cutting down trees for the Chief, for it was near to spring-time and the people were in need of logs

for building roads over the rivers. One day Rabbit went to Beaver and said, "The Chief sent me to you to bring you to a great tree he wishes you to cut down at once."

So Beaver went along with him. But when Beaver was busy at his task cutting down the tree, Rabbit hit him a savage blow on the head with a big stick hoping to kill him and thus again to anger the Chief. Poor Beaver fell to the ground and Rabbit ran away. But Beaver was only stunned. He got up after a time and went home muttering to himself and rubbing his sore head. Soon Rabbit came back to the tree and found Beaver gone. He knew that his blow had failed. Then he put on again his tattered old dress and his ragged shawl and his colored spectacles and the hat with the red feather sticking to the top, and he went to Beaver's house by the stream, hobbling along with a stick.

"The Chief sent me to you to bring you to a great tree he wishes you to cut down at once," he called. And Beaver said, "I have already tried to cut a great tree for him to-day and I should have finished it had I not been beaten with a stick until I was stunned by the blow."

"Who struck you?" asked Rabbit, laughing to himself.

"Rabbit struck me," answered Beaver. "He is a great robber and a liar," said Rabbit.

"He is all that," said Beaver, rubbing the lump on his head. So Beaver went along with Rabbit. And Rabbit asked as they went along, "How is it that you are alive after that cruel blow?"

And Beaver said, "Rabbit hit me on the head. If he had hit me on the back of my neck he would have killed me, for there I keep the secret of my life."

When Beaver was busy again at his task cutting down the tree, Rabbit hit him a powerful blow on the back of the neck and poor Beaver fell down dead. Then he cut off his tail that was made like a file, and went away happy, for he knew that the Chief would be very angry when he found what had happened to his wood-cutter.

When the Chief learned that Beaver had been killed, his wrath knew no bounds, for he could ill afford at this time to lose his best woodchopper. He blamed Rabbit for the deed, but he could not be sure that his suspicions were well-founded. Rabbit kept out of the Chief's sight for some weeks. But one day in early summer he was very hungry. He saw all the other animals filling their bellies with their favourite food, and he decided to forget

his sulks and to ask the Chief for help.

So he went to the Chief and said haughtily, "I want you to give me food for my own special use as you have done with the other animals. You must do it at once or I will do you much harm."

Then the Chief remembered what Rabbit had done to his dancing Bear, and he thought of the death of Beaver, for which he blamed Rabbit without proof, and he grew red with anger. He seized Rabbit by the heels and said, "Henceforth the dogs will always chase you, and you will never have peace when they are near. And you will live for the most part on whatever food I throw you into now."

Then he whirled Rabbit around his head by the heels, and he threw him from him with great force, hoping to drop him in a great black swamp near-by. Poor Rabbit went flying through the air for a great distance, farther than the Chief had hoped, and he dropped with a thud into a field of clover on the edge of which cabbages and lettuce were growing. And since that time the dogs have always chased Rabbit and he has lived for the most part on cabbages and lettuce and clover which he steals on moonlight nights from farmers' fields.

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