

How Raven Brought Fire to the Indians

Canadian Fairy Tales

Canadian Native American North American

Intermediate
13 min read

Many ages ago when the world was still young, Raven and White Sea-gull lived near together in Canada, far in the north country on the shores of the Great Water in the west. They were very good friends and they always worked in harmony and they had much food and many servants in common. White Sea-gull knew no guile; he was always very open and frank and honest in his dealings with others. But Raven was a sly fellow, and at times he was not lacking in treachery and deceit. But Sea-gull did not suspect him, and the two lived always on very friendly terms. In these far-back times in the north country all the world was dark and there was no light but that of the stars. Sea-gull owned all the daylight, but he was very stingy and he kept it always locked up in a box. He would give none of it to anyone else, and he never let it out of the box except when he needed a little of it to help himself when he went far away on his journeys.

After a time Raven grew envious of Sea-gull's possession. And he said, "It is not fair that Sea-gull should keep the daylight all to himself locked up in a box. It was meant for all the world and not for him alone, and it would be of great value to all of us if he would sometimes let a little of it out." So he went to Sea-gull and said, "Give me some of your daylight. You do not need it all and I can use some of it with advantage." But Sea-gull said, "No. I want it all for myself. What could you do with daylight, you with your coat as black as night?" and he would not give him any of it. So Raven made up his mind that he would have to get some daylight from Sea-

gull by stealth.

Soon afterwards Raven gathered some prickly thorns and burdocks and scattered them on the ground between Sea-gull's house and the beach where the canoes were lying. Then he went to Sea-gull's window and cried loudly, "Our canoes are going adrift in the surf. Come quickly and help me to save them." Sea-gull sprang out of bed and ran half-asleep on his bare feet. But as he ran to the beach the thorns stuck in his bare flesh, and he howled with pain. He crawled back to his house, saying, "My canoe may go adrift if it pleases; I cannot walk because of the splinters in my feet."

Raven chuckled to himself, and he moved away, pretending to go to the beach to draw up the canoes. Then he went into Sea-gull's house. Sea-gull was still howling with pain; he was sitting crying on the side of his bed and he was trying to pull the thorns from his feet as best he could.

"I will help you," said Raven, "for I have often done this before. I am a very good doctor." So he took an awl made from whale-bone and he caught hold of Sea-gull's foot, with the pretense of removing the thorns. But instead of taking them out he only pushed them in farther until poor Sea-gull howled louder than ever.

And Raven said, "It is so dark I cannot see to pull these thorns from your feet. Give me some daylight and I will soon cure you. A doctor must always have a little light." So Sea-gull unlocked the box and lifted the cover just a little bit so that a faint gleam of light came out.

"That is better," said Raven. But instead of picking out the thorns he pushed them in as he had done before, until Sea-gull howled and kicked in pain. "Why are you so stingy with your light?" snapped Raven. "Do you think I am an owl and that I can see well enough in the darkness to heal your feet? Open the box wide and I will soon make you well."

So saying, he purposely fell heavily against Sea-gull and knocked the box on the floor. The cover flew open and daylight escaped and spread quickly over all the world. Poor Sea-gull tried his best to lure it back again into the box, but his efforts proved fruitless, for it had gone for ever. Raven said he was very sorry for the accident, but after he had taken all the thorns from Sea-gull's feet he went home laughing to himself and well pleased because of the success of his trick.

Soon there was light in all the world. But Raven could not see very well, for the light was too bright and his eyes were not accustomed to it. He sat for a time looking towards the east, but he saw there nothing of interest. The

next day he saw a bit farther, for he was now getting used to the new conditions. The third day he could see distinctly a line of hills far in the east, rising against the sky, and covered with a blue mist. He looked long at the strange sight. Then he saw far away towards the hill a thin column of smoke lifting heavenwards. He had never seen smoke before, but he had often heard of it from travelers in strange places. "That must be the country of which I have been told," he said. "In that land dwell the people who alone possess Fire. We have searched for it for many ages and now I think we have found it." Then he thought, "We now have the daylight, and what a fine thing it would be if we could also have Fire," and he determined to set out to find it.

On the following day he called his servants together and told them of his plans. He said, "We shall set out at once, for the distance is far." And he asked three of his best servants, Robin, Mole and Flea, to go with him. Flea brought out his little wagon and they all tried to get into it, but it was much too small to hold them. Then they tried Mole's carriage, but it was much too frail, and it had scarcely started to move when it broke down and they all fell out in a heap. Then they tried Robin's carriage, but it was much too high and it toppled over under its heavy load and threw them all to the ground. Then Raven stole Sea-gull's large strong carriage, for Sea-gull was asleep, and it did very well, and they started on their journey, taking turns pushing the carriage along with a pole over the flat plain.

After a strange journey in queer places they reached the land of the people who owned Fire, guided along by the thin column of smoke. The people were not people of earth. Some say they were the Fish people, but no one knows. They sat around in a large circle with Fire in their midst, for it was autumn and the days and nights were chill. And Fire was in many places. Raven looked on for a while from afar thinking of the best plan to obtain Fire. Then he said to Robin, "You can move faster than any of us. You must steal Fire. You can fly in quickly, pick it up in your bill and take it back to us and the people will not see nor hear you."

So Robin picked out a spot where there were few people, and he darted in quickly and picked up fire in a twinkling and flew back unharmed towards his companions. But he had only taken a very little bit of it. When he got half-way back to his friends, Fire was so hot in his bill that it gave him a strange pain and he had to drop it on the ground. It fell to the earth with a crash and it was so small that it flickered faintly. Robin called to his companions to bring the carriage. Then he stood over Fire and fanned it with his wings to keep it alive. It was very hot, but he stood bravely to his task until his breast was badly scorched and he had to move away. His efforts to save Fire were of no avail, and before his companions reached him Fire had died, and only a black coal remained. And poor Robin's breast was singed, and to this day the breasts of his descendants are a

reddish-brown color because he was scorched while trying to steal Fire ages ago.

Then Raven asked Flea to make the attempt to steal Fire. But Flea said, "I am too little. The heat would roast me to death; and, further, I might miscalculate the distance and hop into the flame."

Then Raven asked Mole to try, but Mole said, "Oh no, I am better fitted for other work. My fur would all be singed like Robin's breast." Raven took good care that he would not go himself, for he was a great coward.

So he said, "There is a better and easier way. We will steal the baby of the Chief and hold him for ransom. Perhaps they will give us Fire in exchange for him," and they all thought this was a very good idea. Raven asked, "Who will volunteer to steal the baby?" for he always made the others do all the work.

Flea said, "I will go. In one jump I will be into the house, and in another jump I will be out again, for I can hop a great distance." But the others laughed and said, "You could not carry the baby; you are too small."

The Mole said, "I will go. I can tunnel a passage very quietly under the house and right up to the baby's cradle. I can then steal the baby and no one will hear me or see me." So it was agreed that Mole should go. In a few minutes Mole made his tunnel, and he was soon back with the baby. Then they got into their carriage and hurried home with their prize.

When the Chief of the Fire people discovered the loss of his child he was very angry. And in all the land there was great sorrow because the Chief's heir, the hope of the tribe, had gone. And the child's mother and her women wept so bitterly that their tears fell like rain on all the land. The Chief said he would give anything he possessed to find his child. But although his people searched far and near, they could not find the baby. After many days a wayfarer who had come far from the Great Water in the west brought them news that a strange child was living far to the westward in the village by the sea. He said, "He is not of their tribe. He looks like the children of your village," and he advised them to go to see him for themselves. So the Chief sent his men to search for them guided by the wayfarer.

When they reached Raven's village, they were told that a strange baby was indeed there; the child was described to them, but he was kept out of sight, and Raven would not tell how he had happened to come there. And Raven said, "How do I know he is your Chief's child? People tell strange lies these days. If you want him you can pay for him, for he has caused us much trouble and expense."

So the messengers went back and reported to the Chief what they had heard. From the description, the Chief

knew that the child was his, so he gave the messengers very valuable presents of pearls and rich robes and sent them back again to ransom his boy. But Raven, when he saw the presents, said, "No, I do not want these gifts; they do not pay me for my trouble," and he would not part with the baby. The messengers again reported to the Chief what had happened. Then the Chief gave them still richer gifts, the best he had in all his land, and sent them back. But again Raven said, "No, your gifts are valueless, compared with my trouble and expense. Say this to your Chief."

When the Chief heard this from his messengers he was sore perplexed, for he had offered the best he had, and he thought that he had reached the end of his resources. So he said, "Go back and ask the people to demand what they wish in exchange for my boy and they will receive it if it can be provided." So the messengers went back to Raven and spoke as they had been commanded.

And Raven said, "Only one thing can pay for the child, and that is Fire. Give me Fire and you can take the baby." The messenger laughed and said, "Why did you not say so at first and save us all this trouble and anxiety? Fire is the most plentiful thing in our kingdom, and we hold it in no value." So they returned happy to the Chief. And he sent back much Fire and received his child unharmed from Raven in exchange. And he sent Raven two small stones which the messengers taught Raven how to use.

And they said, "If you ever lose Fire or if it dies for lack of food you can always call it back to life with these two little stones." Then they showed him how to make Fire with the two little stones and withered grass, and birch-bark and dry pine, and Raven thought it was very easy. And he felt very proud because he had brought Fire and Light to the earth. He kept Fire for himself for a long time, and although the people clamoured loudly for it, he would not give any of it away. Soon, however, he decided to sell a quantity of it, for he now had the power of making it. So he said to himself, "This is a good way to get many wives," and he announced that he would only sell some of his fire in return for a wife.

And many families bought his fire and in exchange he received many wives. And to this day he still has many wives and he still moves about from place to place with a flock of them always around him. But the Indians when they arrived took Fire away from him. Thus Fire came to the Indians in the olden days. And when it has died, as it often does, they still sometimes use Raven's flint stones to bring it back to life.

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