

The Bird Wife

A Treasury Of Eskimo Tales

North American

Easy
6 min read

Itajung, one of the Inuit tribe, was vexed because a young woman would not marry him, so he left his home and traveled far away into the land of the birds. He came to a small lake in which many geese were swimming. On the shore he saw a great many boots. He cautiously crept near and stole a pair and hid them.

Presently the birds came out of the water, and finding a pair of boots gone they were alarmed, and quickly forming into two long lines with their leader at the point where the lines met, they flew away crying, "Honk! Honk! Honk!"

But one of the flock remained behind crying, "I want my boots! I want my boots!"

Itajung came forth from his hiding-place and said, "I will give you your boots if you will become my wife."

"That I will not do," she replied.

"Very well," he said, and turned around to go away.

"I don't want to, but I will be your wife if you will bring back my boots," she called.

He came back and gave her the boots, and when she put them on she was changed into a woman.

They walked away together, and wandered down to the seaside and, as she liked to live near the water, they

settled in a large village by the sea. Here they lived for several years and had a son. Itajung became a highly respected man, for he was by far the best whaler in all the Inuit tribe.

One day they killed a whale and were busy cutting it up and carrying the meat and blubber to their homes. Many of the women were helping, but though Itajung was working very hard, his wife stood lazily looking on.

“Come and help us,” he called to her.

“My food is not from the sea,” she replied. “My food is from the land. I will not eat the meat of a whale; neither will I help.”

“You must eat it; it will fill your stomach,” said he.

She began to cry, and said, “I will not eat it. I will not soil my nice white clothing.”

She went to the beach and searched for feathers. When she found some, she put them between her fingers and the fingers of her child. They were both turned into geese and flew away. When the Inuit saw this they cried, “Itajung, your wife is flying away.”

Itajung became very sad. He no longer cared for the meat and blubber, nor for the whales spouting near the shore. He followed in the direction his wife had taken, and went over all the land in search of her.

After traveling for many weary months, he came to a river where a man with a large axe was chopping chips from a piece of wood, and as fast as he chopped them they were turned into salmon and slipped out of the man’s hands into the river and swam down to a large lake near by. The name of the man was Small Salmon.

As Itajung looked at the man he was frightened almost to death; for the back of the man was entirely hollow, and Itajung could see right through him and out at the other side. He was so scared that he kept very still and crept back and away out around him. He wanted to ask if the man had seen his wife, for that was what he asked everyone he came to. So he went around and came from the opposite direction, facing the man.

When Small Salmon saw him approaching he stopped chopping and asked, “Which way did you approach me?”

“I came from that direction,” said Itajung, pointing in the way he had last approached.

“That is lucky for you, for if you had come the other way and had seen my back, I should have killed you at once with my hatchet.”

“I am glad I don’t have to die,” said Itajung. “But haven’t you seen my wife? She left me and came this way.”

“Yes, I saw her. Do you see that little island in the large lake? That is where she lives now, and she has taken another husband.”

“Oh, I can never reach her,” said Itajung in despair. “I have no boat and do not know how to reach the island.”

“I will help you,” said Small Salmon kindly. “Come down to the beach with me. Here is the backbone of a salmon. Now shut your eyes. The backbone will turn into a kayak and carry you safely to the island. But mind you keep your eyes shut. If you open them the kayak will upset.”

“I will obey,” said Itajung.

He closed his eyes, the backbone became a kayak, and away he sped over the water. He heard no splashing and was anxious to know if he really was moving, so he peeped open his eyes a trifle.

At once the boat began to swing violently, but he quickly shut his eyes, and it went on steadily, and he soon landed on the island.

There he saw a hut and his son playing on the beach near it. The boy on looking up saw and recognized him, and ran to his mother, crying:

“Mother, Father is here and is coming to our hut.”

“Go back to your play,” she said; “your father is far away and cannot find us.”

The lad went back, but again he ran in, saying:

“Mother, Father is here and is coming to our hut.”

Again she sent him away; but he soon returned, saying: “Father is right here.”

He had scarcely said it when Itajung opened the door. When the new husband saw him he said to his wife, "Open that box in the corner of the hut."

She did so, and a great quantity of feathers flew out and stuck fast to them. The hut disappeared. The woman, her new husband, and the child were transformed into geese and flew away, leaving Itajung standing alone.

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