



The Fall of the Spider Man

Canadian Fairy Tales

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Intermediate
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In olden times the Spider Man lived in the sky-country. He dwelt in a bright little house all by himself, where he weaved webs and long flimsy ladders by which people went back and forth from the sky to the earth. The Star-people often went at night to earth where they roamed about as fairies of light, doing good deeds for women and little children, and they always went back and forth on the ladder of the Spider Man. The Spider Man had to work very hard, weaving his webs, and spinning the yarn from which his ladders were made. One day when he had a short breathing-time from his toil he looked down at the earth-country and there he saw many of the earth-people playing at games, or taking sweet sap from the maple trees, or gathering berries on the rolling hills; but most of the men were lazily idling and doing nothing. The women were all working, after the fashion of Indians in those days; the men were working but little. And Spider Man said to himself, "I should like to go to the earth-country where men idle their time away. I would marry four wives who would work for me while I would take life easy, for I need a rest."

He was very tired of his work for he was kept at it day and night always spinning and weaving his webs. But when he asked for a rest he was not allowed to stop; he was only kicked for his pains and called Sleepy Head, and Lazy-bones and other harsh names, and told to work harder. Then he grew angry and he resolved to punish the Star-people because they kept him so hard at work. He thought that if he punished them and made himself a nuisance, they would be glad to be rid of him. So he hit upon a crafty plan. Each night when a Star-fairy was climbing back to the sky-country, just as he came near the top of the ladder, the Spider Man would

cut the strands and the fairy would fall to earth with a great crash. Night after night he did this, and he chuckled to himself as he saw the sky-fairies sprawling through the air and kicking their heels, while the earth-people looked up wonderingly at them and called them Shooting Stars. Many Star-people fell to earth in this way because of the Spider Man's tricks, and they could never get back to the sky-country because of their broken limbs or their disfigured faces, for in the sky-country the people all must have beautiful faces and forms. But Spider Man's tricks brought him no good; the people would not drive him away because they needed his webs and he was kept always at his tasks. At last he decided to run away of his own accord, and, one night when the Moon and the Stars had gone to work and the Sun was asleep, he said farewell to the sky-country and let himself down to earth by one of his own strands of yarn, spinning it as he dropped down.

In the earth-country he married four wives as he had planned, for he wanted them to work for him while he took his ease. He thought he had worked long enough. All went well for a time and the Spider Man was quite happy living his lazy and contented life. Not a strand did he spin, nor a web did he weave. No men on earth were working; only the women toiled. At last, Glooskap, who ruled upon the earth in that time, became very angry because the men in these parts were so lazy, and he sent Famine into their country to punish them for their sins. Famine came very stealthily into the land and gathered up all the corn and carried it off; then he called to him all the animals, and the birds, and the fish of the sea and river, and he took them away with him. In all the land there was nothing left to eat. Only water remained. The people were very hungry and they lived on water for many days. Sometimes they drank the water cold, sometimes hot, sometimes lukewarm, but at best it was but poor fare. The Spider Man soon grew tired of this strange diet, for it did not satisfy his hunger to live always on water. It filled his belly and swelled him to a great size, but it brought him little nourishment or strength. So he said, "There must be good food somewhere in the world; I will go in search of it."

That night when all the world was asleep he took a large bag, and crept softly away from his four wives and set out on his quest for food. He did not want any one to know where he was going. For several days he traveled, living only on water; but he found no food, and the bag was still empty on his back. At last one day he saw birds in the trees and he knew that he was near the border of the Hunger-Land. That night in the forest when he stopped at a stream to drink, he saw a tiny gleam of light far ahead of him through the trees. He hurried towards the light and soon he came upon a man with a great hump on his shoulders and scars on his face, and a light hanging at his back, with a shade on it which he could close and open at his will.

The Spider Man said, "I am looking for food; tell me where I can find it."

And the humped man with the light said, "Do you want it for your people?"

But the Spider Man said, "No, I want it for myself."

Then the humped man laughed and said, "You are near to the border of the Land of Plenty; follow me and I will give you food." Then he flashed the light at his back, opening and closing the shade so that the light flickered, and he set off quickly through the trees.

The Spider Man followed the light flashing in the darkness, but he had to go so fast that he was almost out of breath when he reached the house where the humped man had stopped. But the humped man only laughed when he saw the Spider Man coming puffing wearily along with his fat and swollen belly. He gave him a good fat meal and the Spider Man soon felt better after his long fast.

Then the humped man said, "You are the Spider Man who once weaved webs in the sky. I, too, once dwelt in the star-country, and one dark night as I was climbing back from the earth-country on your ladder, carrying my lamp on my back to light the way, when I was near the sky you cut the strands of the web and I fell to the earth with a great crash. That is why I have a great hump on my back and scars on my face, and because of this I have never been allowed to go back to the sky-country of the stars. I roam the earth at nights as a forest fairy just as I did in the olden days, for I have my former power still with me, and I still carry my lamp at my back; it is the starlight from the sky-country. I shall never get back to the star-country while I have life. But some day when my work on earth is done I shall go back. But although you were cruel to me I will give you food." The Spider Man remembered the nights he had cut the ladder strands, and he laughed to himself at the memory of the star-fairies falling to earth with a great crash. But the man with the light knew that now he had his chance to take vengeance on the Spider Man. The latter did not suspect evil. He was glad to get food at last.

Then the humped man said, "I will give you four pots. You must not open them until you get home. They will then be filled with food, and thereafter always when you open them they will be packed with good food. And the food will never grow less."

The Spider Man put the four pots in his bag and slinging it over his shoulder he set out for his home, well pleased with his success. After he had gone away, the humped man used his power to make him hungry. Yet for several days he traveled without opening the pots, for although he was almost starving he wished to do as

the humped man had told him. At last he could wait no longer. He stopped near his home, took the pots out of the bag and opened them. They were filled with good food as he had been promised. In one was a fine meat stew; in another were many cooked vegetables; in another was bread made from Indian corn; and in another was luscious ripe fruit. He ate until he was full. He covered the pots, put them back in the bag, and hid the bag among the trees. Then he went home. He had meanwhile taken pity on his people and he decided to invite the Chief and all the tribe to a feast the next evening, for the pots would be full, and the food would never decrease, and there would be enough for all. He thought the people would regard him as a very wonderful man if he could supply them all with good food in their hunger.

When he reached his home his wives were very glad to see him back, and they at once brought him water, the only food they had. But he laughed them to scorn, and threw the water in their faces and said, "Oh, foolish women, I do not want water; it is not food for a great man like me. I have had a good meal of meat stew and corn bread and cooked vegetables and luscious ripe fruit. I know where much food is to be found, but I alone know. I can find food when all others fail, for I am a great man. Go forth and invite the Chief and all the people to a feast which I shall provide for them to-morrow night—a feast for all the land, for my food never grows less." They were all amazed when they heard his story, and the thought of his good meal greatly added to their hunger. But they went out and summoned all the tribe to a feast as he had told them.

The next night all the people gathered for the feast, for the news of it had spread through all the land. They had taken no water that day, for they wished to eat well, and they were very hungry. They were as hungry as wild beasts in search of food. The Spider Man was very glad because the people praised him, and he proudly brought in his bag of pots. The people all waited hungrily and eagerly. But when he uncovered the first pot there was no food there; he uncovered the second pot, but there was no food there; he uncovered all the pots, but not a bit of food was in any of them. They were all empty, and in the bottom of each was a great gaping hole. Now it had happened in this way.

When the humped man, the Star-fairy, had given the pots to the Spider Man, he knew well that the Spider Man would disobey his orders and that he would open the pots before he reached his home. He chuckled to himself, for he knew that now he could take vengeance on the web-weaver who had injured him. So when the Spider Man had left the pots among the trees, the humped man used his magic power and made holes in the pots, and the charm of the food was broken and all the food disappeared. When the people saw the empty pots they thought they had been purposely deceived. The remains of the food and the smell of stew and of fruit still clung

to the pots. They thought the Spider Man had eaten all the food himself. So in their great hunger and their rage and their disappointment they fell upon him and beat him and bore him to the ground, while the humped man with the lamp at his back hiding behind the trees looked on and laughed in his glee. Then the people split the Spider Man's arms to the shoulders, and his legs to the thighs, so that he had eight limbs instead of four.

And the humped man—the star-fairy named Fire-fly—came forth from behind the trees and standing over the fallen Spider Man he said, “Henceforth because of your cruelty to the star-people you will always crawl on eight legs, and you will have a fat round belly because of the water you have drunk; and sometimes you will live on top of the water. But you shall always eat only flies and insects. And you will always spin downwards but never upwards, and you will often try to get back to the star-country, but you shall always slip down again on the strand of yarn you have spun.” Then Fire-fly flashed his light and went quickly away, opening and closing the shade of his lamp as he flitted among the trees. And to this day the Spider Man lives as the humped man of the lamp had spoken, because of the cruelty he practiced on the star-fairies in the olden days.

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