



The Last of the Thunderbirds

A Treasury Of Eskimo Tales

North American

Intermediate

5 min read

In ancient times a great many giant eagles or thunderbirds lived in the mountains; but in later years they had all disappeared except one single pair which made their home in the mountain top overlooking the Yukon near Sabotnisky. The top of this mountain was round and the eagles had hollowed out a great basin on the summit which they used for a nest. Around the edge of it was a rocky rim from which they could see far across the broad river, or could look down upon the village at the base of the mountain on the water's edge.

From their perch on this rocky wall these great birds would soar away, looking like a cloud in the sky, to seize a reindeer from a passing herd and bring it to their young. Or, again, they would circle out with a noise like thunder from their shaking wings, and drop down upon a fisherman in his kayak on the river, carrying man and boat to the top of the mountain. There the man would be eaten by the young thunderbirds, and the kayak would lie bleaching among the bones and other refuse scattered along the border of the nest. Every fall the young birds would fly away to the northland, while the old ones would remain by the mountain.

After many fishermen had been carried away by the birds, there came a time when only the most daring would venture upon the river. One summer day a brave young hunter was starting out to look at his fish traps and he said to his wife, "Don't go outside the house while I am away, for fear of the birds."

After he was gone she noticed that the water tub was empty, and took a bucket to go to the river for water. As

she bent over to fill the vessel a roaring noise like thunder filled the air, and one of the birds darted down and seized her in its talons. The villagers saw the bird swoop down, and they wailed aloud in sorrow and terror as they watched her being carried through the air to the mountain top.

The hunter came home and the villagers gathered about with many lamentations. "Oh, pitiful! pitiful! your pretty wife was carried away by the thunderbirds! Too bad! Too bad! By this time she is torn to pieces and fed to the young demons!"

Not one word did the husband utter. Going into his empty house he took down his bow and his quiver of war arrows and started toward the mountain.

"Don't go! Don't go!" cried the villagers; "of what use is it? She is dead and devoured ere this. You will only add one more to their victims."

Not a word did the hunter reply. He strode on and on and they watched him climbing up and up the mountainside till he was lost to view. At last he gained the rim of the nest and looked in. The old birds were away, but the fierce young eagles greeted him with shrill cries and fiery, flashing eyes. The hunter's heart was full of anger and he quickly bent his bow, loosing the war arrows one after another till the last one of the hateful birds lay dead in the nest.

With heart still burning for revenge, the hunter hid himself beside a great rock near the nest and waited for the parent birds. They came. They saw their young lying dead and bloody in the nest, and their cries of rage echoed from the cliffs on the farther side of the great river. They soared up into the air looking for the one who had killed their young. Quickly they saw the brave hunter beside the great stone, and the mother bird swooped down upon him, her wings sounding like a gale in a spruce forest. Swiftly fitting an arrow to the string, as the eagle came down the hunter sent it deep into her throat. With a hoarse cry she turned and flew away over the hills far to the north.

The father bird had been circling overhead and came roaring down upon the hunter, who, at the right moment, crouched close to the ground behind the stone, and the eagle's sharp claws struck only the hard rock. As the bird arose, eager to swoop down again, the hunter sprang from his shelter and drove two heavy war arrows deep under its wing. Uttering hoarse cries of rage, and spreading his broad wings, the thunderbird

floated away like a cloud in the sky, far into the northland, and was never seen again.

Having taken blood vengeance, the hunter went down into the nest where among ribs of old canoes and other bones he found some fragments of his wife, which he carried to the water's edge and, building a fire, made food offerings and libations of water such as would be pleasing to her ghost.

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