



The Red Bear

A Treasury Of Eskimo Tales

North American

Intermediate
5 min read

On the tundra south of the mouth of the Yukon River an orphan boy once lived with his aunt. They were all alone with no house within sight; but the boy had heard that there were people living farther up the river. One summer day he got into his kayak and rowed up the river hoping to find other human beings. He traveled on until he came to a large village where he saw many people moving about. There he landed and began calling to the people expecting to make friends with them.

But instead of being friendly, they disliked all strangers and, running down to the shore, they seized him, broke his kayak to pieces, tore his clothing off him, and beat him badly. Then they took him up into the village and kept him there all summer, beating and ill-treating him very often. In the fall one of the men took pity on him and made him a kayak, and helped him to escape. He went down the river and arrived at home after a long absence.

During the summer other people had built houses near the home of his aunt and there was a small village instead of the one lone hut. He walked among the buildings until he found his aunt's house; but when he entered, he frightened her very much, for at first glance she thought it was a skeleton, he had been starved and beaten so long.

When his aunt recognized him and had heard his story, she said, "Oh, you poor boy! What you must have suffered! I am full of rage at those cruel villagers. I shall find some way to revenge your wrongs!"

She sat thinking a while and then said to him, "Bring me a piece of a small log."

He brought the piece of wood and she whittled and rubbed it into the form of an animal with long teeth and long, sharp claws, and painted it white on the throat and red on the sides. Then they took the image to the edge of the stream and placed it in the water.

"Go now," she said to it, "and kill everyone you find in the village where my boy was beaten."

The image did not move.

She took it out of the water and cried over it, letting her tears fall upon it; and the warm tears brought it to life and made it feel sorry for her and the boy. She put it back into the water.

"Now, go and kill the bad people who beat my boy," she said.

At this the image floated across the creek and crawled up on the other side, where it began to grow, soon becoming a large red bear. It turned and looked at the woman till she called out, "Go, and spare no one."

The bear went away and came to the village on the big river, the one to which the boy had gone. There the first one he met was a man going for water. This one was quickly torn in pieces, and one after another of the villagers met the same fate; for the bear stayed near the village until he had destroyed one-half of the people, and the rest were so terrified that they began moving away.

Then he swam across the Yukon and went over the tundra to the farther side of another river, killing everyone he met. For he had become so bloodthirsty that the least sign of life seemed to fill him with fury until he had destroyed it.

From there he turned back, and one day came to the place on the river where he had first come to life. Seeing the people on the opposite side he became furious, tearing the ground with his claws and growling, and starting to cross the river to get at them. When the villagers saw this, they were much frightened, and ran about saying, "Here is the old woman's dog! We shall all be killed!" "Tell the old woman to stop her dog!" They had never seen a bear and they thought it was a dog she had made.

The woman went to meet the bear which did not try to hurt her, but was passing by her to get at the other people when she caught him by the hair on the back of his neck.

"Do not hurt these people," she said; "they have been kind to me and have given me food when I was hungry."

She led the bear into her house, and still holding on to him, she talked to him kindly.

"You have done my bidding well, and I am pleased with you," she said; "but you must not overdo it. Hereafter you must injure no one unless he tries to hurt or injure you."

When she had finished talking, she led him to the door and sent him away over the tundra. Before she made him there had never been any of his kind, but since then there have always been red bears.

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