



The Sea-King's Victory

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Maori

Easy
4 min read

The Sea-king in his palace under the water heard the sound of bitter weeping on the shore. "Somebody is in trouble," he said. "I must see what is the matter."

He changed himself into a fish and swam to the shore to look. A woman walked along the beach, wailing loudly.

"Why do you weep?" asked the Sea-king.

The woman stopped, looked into the water and saw the fish, and guessed that he must be the king.

"I weep because I have lost my husband," she replied. "We quarrelled, and he left me. He lives now in the next village. Why we quarrelled I hardly know, for indeed we love one another. I have been to the village to beg him to come back to me. He would have come, but his friends laughed at him for yielding, so I return alone and sorrowful."

She told her tale with such heartbroken sobs that the Sea-king's pity rose on her behalf.

"I will send a message to the village; may be your husband will soon return to you," he said. "Go quietly home and await events." The wife went home, not much comforted. She was doubtful of the Sea-king's power on land.

The Sea-king himself had no doubts. He called a sea-gull. "Go to the village near by," he said, "and tell the

people to restore the husband to the wife. Say that I, the Sea-king, command it.”

The sea-gull flew with the message. “Restore the husband to the wife, ” she called from the wall surrounding the village. “It is the great Sea-king who sends the word. ”

“The Sea-king! Who obeys him?” laughed the villagers. “Go back. Tell your Sea-king that the husband stays with us as long as we desire it. ”

The gull returned with the insulting message.



“The Sea-King is angry.” Illustration by unknown artist, published in *Maoriland Fairy Tales* by Edith Howes (1913), Ward, Lock, and Co.

The Sea-king was pale with anger. “They dare to laugh at me and doubt my power!” he cried. “They shall pay for this. I will teach them to obey.”

From his palace he sent a summons to all fighting fish, big and little, to come to his aid. They crowded round his palace in their smooth grey coats, which in those days were one and all alike.

“Soldier-fish!” said the king, “your help is needed. Sharpen your teeth and polish your skins this night, for in the morning we go to battle with men. On land my power has been insulted.”

The fish spent the night in polishing their already shining skins and sharpening their teeth and the spines of their fins and tails. In the morning they swam in ranks before the palace doors, ready for the fight.

The Sea-king swam out, changed to the likeness of the biggest fish of all. Placing himself at their head, he led them to the battle. Below the sea they swam in their hundreds of thousands, rising to the surface as they neared the shore.

Scrambling up the beach, they marched across the country to the village.

The people of the village, seeing them coming, ran out to watch this strange army—fish marching on dry land.

“What a joke” they said. “Whoever saw this before?”

One man, wiser than his fellows, shouted, “It is the Sea-king’s army. This is no joke, but grim war. Remember, we laughed at the Sea-king’s power. To your houses for your spears and axes!”

Some one cried, “But fish cannot fight with men.”

“We must destroy this army or it will destroy us,” replied the first.

The men ran to their houses, caught up their spears and axes, and came out to fight the fish.

Now began the strangest battle ever seen. Over the wall of the village slid the great fish army, rank on rank, column after column, until the ground between the houses was covered with their moving bodies. The men speared and hacked and cut at the fish, while the fish fought fiercely with sharp teeth and spiked fins and

flapping tails, or threw the men by wriggling with polished skins beneath their feet .

The battle raged all day. The men fought for supremacy , but the numbers and the courage of the fish wore them out . When evening came , on all sides men lay wounded and beaten ; the fish army had won .

The Sea-king stood high in his kingly shape again , looking down on the beaten men .

“You will send back the husband to the wife, ” he commanded .

“Yes, ” they answered .

“You will never again laugh at my power on land?”

“No.”

“That is well. Bid the husband stand before me . ”

The husband came. “Back to your wife! Quarrel no more. Treat her kindly and be happy, ” said the King .

Without a word the husband turned and went home to his wife, to live with her happily ever after .

The Sea-king led his victorious army back to his sea-palace. “You have done nobly, ” he said . “ Ask me what boon you will , and if it is mine . to give you shall have it. “

One by one the fish swam up and stated each his heart ‘ s desire . One by one their requests were granted. Most of them had seen strange sights upon the land, colours and forms such as were never seen below the sea. From these they chose their gifts. A Cod had gazed upon the gorgeous colours of the sunset, and asked for these upon its back. Another preferred to wear the soft blue of the summer sky. One had seen a boy ‘ s kite , and wished to resemble it in shape; that is why today the Skate is broad and flat. One wished to be red like blood, and to be able to groan like a wounded man; and so you may always hear the Gurnet groan when it is caught. One asked that a spear might be fixed at the end of his nose ; to this day he carries it there, and men call him the Guard-fish .

So, in turn, every soldier won what he most desired . This is how the fish obtained their varying shapes and colours. These are their rewards for bravery .

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