



The Tree-Bound

Old Indian Legends

Native American

Intermediate

11 min read

It was a clear summer day. The blue, blue sky dropped low over the edge of the green level land. A large yellow sun hung directly overhead.

The singing of birds filled the summer space between earth and sky with sweet music. Again and again sang a yellow-breasted birdie—"Koda Ni Dakota!" He insisted upon it. "Koda Ni Dakota!" which was "Friend, you're a Dakota! Friend, you're a Dakota!" Perchance the birdie meant the avenger with the magic arrow, for there across the plain he strode. He was handsome in his paint and feathers, proud with his great buckskin quiver on his back and a long bow in his hand. Afar to an eastern camp of cone-shaped teepees he was going. There over the Indian village hovered a large red eagle threatening the safety of the people. Every morning rose this terrible red bird out of a high chalk bluff and spreading out his gigantic wings soared slowly over the round camp ground. Then it was that the people, terror-stricken, ran screaming into their lodges. Covering their heads with their blankets, they sat trembling with fear. No one dared to venture out till the red eagle had disappeared beyond the west, where meet the blue and green.

In vain tried the chieftain of the tribe to find among his warriors a powerful marksman who could send a death arrow to the man-hungry bird. At last to urge his men to their utmost skill he bade his crier proclaim a new reward.

Of the chieftain's two beautiful daughters he would have his choice who brought the dreaded red eagle with an arrow in its breast.

Upon hearing these words, the men of the village, both young and old, both heroes and cowards, trimmed new arrows for the contest. At gray dawn there stood indistinct under the shadow of the bluff many human figures; silent as ghosts and wrapped in robes girdled tight about their waists, they waited with chosen bow and arrow.

Some cunning old warriors stayed not with the group. They crouched low upon the open ground. But all eyes alike were fixed upon the top of the high bluff. Breathless they watched for the soaring of the red eagle.

From within the dwellings many eyes peeped through the small holes in the front lapels of the teepee. With shaking knees and hard-set teeth, the women peered out upon the Dakota men prowling about with bows and arrows.

At length when the morning sun also peeped over the eastern horizon at the armed Dakotas, the red eagle walked out upon the edge of the cliff. Pluming his gorgeous feathers, he ruffled his neck and flapped his strong wings together. Then he dived into the air. Slowly he winged his way over the round camp ground; over the men with their strong bows and arrows! In an instant the long bows were bent. Strong straight arrows with red feathered tips sped upward to the blue sky. Ah! slowly moved those indifferent wings, untouched by the poison-beaked arrows. Off to the west beyond the reach of arrow, beyond the reach of eye, the red eagle flew away.

A sudden clamor of high-pitched voices broke the deadly stillness of the dawn. The women talked excitedly about the invulnerable red of the eagle's feathers, while the would-be heroes sulked within their wigwams. "He-he-he!" groaned the chieftain.

On the evening of the same day sat a group of hunters around a bright burning fire. They were talking of a strange young man whom they spied while out upon a hunt for deer beyond the bluffs. They saw the stranger

taking aim. Following the point of his arrow with their eyes, they beheld a herd of buffalo. The arrow sprang from the bow! It darted into the skull of the foremost buffalo. But unlike other arrows it pierced through the head of the creature and spinning in the air lit into the next buffalo head. One by one the buffalo fell upon the sweet grass they were grazing. With straight quivering limbs they lay on their sides. The young man stood calmly by, counting on his fingers the buffalo as they dropped dead to the ground. When the last one fell, he ran thither and picking up his magic arrow wiped it carefully on the soft grass. He slipped it into his long fringed quiver.

“He is going to make a feast for some hungry tribe of men or beasts!” cried the hunters among themselves as they hastened away.

They were afraid of the stranger with the sacred arrow. When the hunter’s tale of the stranger’s arrow reached the ears of the chieftain, his face brightened with a smile. He sent forth fleet horsemen, to learn of him his birth, his name, and his deeds.

“If he is the avenger with the magic arrow, sprung up from the earth out of a clot of buffalo blood, bid him come hither. Let him kill the red eagle with his magic arrow. Let him win for himself one of my beautiful daughters,” he had said to his messengers, for the old story of the badger’s man-son was known all over the level lands.

After four days and nights the braves returned. “He is coming,” they said. “We have seen him. He is straight and tall; handsome in face, with large black eyes. He paints his round cheeks with bright red, and wears the penciled lines of red over his temples like our men of honored rank. He carries on his back a long fringed quiver in which he keeps his magic arrow. His bow is long and strong. He is coming now to kill the big red eagle.” All around the camp ground from mouth to ear passed those words of the returned messengers.

Now it chanced that immortal Iktomi, fully recovered from the brown burnt spots, overheard the people talking. At once he was filled with a new desire. “If only I had the magic arrow, I would kill the red eagle and win the chieftain’s daughter for a wife,” said he in his heart.

Back to his lonely wigwam he hastened. Beneath the tree in front of his teepee he sat upon the ground with chin between his drawn-up knees. His keen eyes scanned the wide plain. He was watching for the avenger.

“He is coming!” said the people,” muttered old Iktomi. All of a sudden he raised an open palm to his brow and peered afar into the west. The summer sun hung bright in the middle of a cloudless sky. There across the green prairie was a man walking bareheaded toward the east.

“Ha! ha! ’tis he! the man with the magic arrow!” laughed Iktomi. And when the bird with the yellow breast sang loud again—”Koda Ni Dakota! Friend, you’re a Dakota!” Iktomi put his hand over his mouth as he threw his head far backward, laughing at both the bird and man.

“He is your friend, but his arrow will kill one of your kind! He is a Dakota, but soon he’ll grow into the bark on this tree! Ha! ha! ha!” he laughed again.

The young avenger walked with swaying strides nearer and nearer toward the lonely wigwam and tree. Iktomi heard the swish! swish! of the stranger’s feet through the tall grass. He was passing now beyond the tree, when Iktomi, springing to his feet, called out: “How, how, my friend! I see you are dressed in handsome deerskins and have red paint on your cheeks. You are going to some feast or dance, may I ask?” Seeing the young man only smiled Iktomi went on: “I have not had a mouthful of food this day. Have pity on me, young brave, and shoot yonder bird for me!” With these words Iktomi pointed toward the tree-top, where sat a bird on the highest branch. The young avenger, always ready to help those in distress, sent an arrow upward and the bird fell. In the next branch it was caught between the forked prongs.

“My friend, climb the tree and get the bird. I cannot climb so high. I would get dizzy and fall,” pleaded Iktomi. The avenger began to scale the tree, when Iktomi cried to him: “My friend, your beaded buckskins may be torn by the branches. Leave them safe upon the grass till you are down again.”

“You are right,” replied the young man, quickly slipping off his long fringed quiver. Together with his dangling pouches and tinkling ornaments, he placed it on the ground. Now he climbed the tree unhindered. Soon from the top he took the bird. “My friend, toss to me your arrow that I may have the honor of wiping it clean on soft deerskin!” exclaimed Iktomi.

“How!” said the brave, and threw the bird and arrow to the ground.

At once Iktomi seized the arrow. Rubbing it first on the grass and then on a piece of deerskin, he muttered indistinct words all the while. The young man, stepping downward from limb to limb, hearing the low muttering, said: “Iktomi, I cannot hear what you say!”

“Oh, my friend, I was only talking of your big heart.”

Again stooping over the arrow Iktomi continued his repetition of charm words. “Grow fast, grow fast to the bark of the tree,” he whispered. Still the young man moved slowly downward. Suddenly dropping the arrow and standing erect, Iktomi said aloud: “Grow fast to the bark of the tree!” Before the brave could leap from the tree he became tight-grown to the bark.

“Ah! ha!” laughed the bad Iktomi. “I have the magic arrow! I have the beaded buckskins of the great avenger!” Hooting and dancing beneath the tree, he said: “I shall kill the red eagle; I shall wed the chieftain’s beautiful daughter!”

“Oh, Iktomi, set me free!” begged the tree-bound Dakota brave. But Iktomi’s ears were like the fungus on a tree. He did not hear with them.

Wearing the handsome buckskins and carrying proudly the magic arrow in his right hand, he started off eastward. Imitating the swaying strides of the avenger, he walked away with a face turned slightly skyward.

“Oh, set me free! I am glued to the tree like its own bark! Cut me loose!” moaned the prisoner.

A young woman, carrying on her strong back a bundle of tightly bound willow sticks, passed near by the lonely teepee. She heard the wailing man’s voice. She paused to listen to the sad words. Looking around she saw nowhere a human creature. “It may be a spirit,” thought she.

“Oh! cut me loose! set me free! Iktomi has played me false! He has made me bark of his tree!” cried the voice again.

The young woman dropped her pack of firewood to the ground. With her stone axe she hurried to the tree. There before her astonished eyes clung a young brave close to the tree.

Too shy for words, yet too kind-hearted to leave the stranger tree-bound, she cut loose the whole bark. Like an open jacket she drew it to the ground. With it came the young man also. Free once more, he started away. Looking backward, a few paces from the young woman, he waved his hand, upward and downward, before her face. This was a sign of gratitude used when words failed to interpret strong emotion.

When the bewildered woman reached her dwelling, she mounted a pony and rode swiftly across the rolling land. To the camp ground in the east, to the chieftain troubled by the red eagle, she carried her story.

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