



Up the Top of the Sky and Down to the Bottom of the sea

A Treasury Of Eskimo Tales

North American

Intermediate

8 min read

One day Raven came back and, sitting beside Man, talked of many things as if they were brothers. After a little Man said, "I understand that you have made a land in the sky."

"Yes, I have a fine land there," answered Raven. "I made that land with all its people and animals, before I made this one."

"I wish you would take me to see it," said Man.

"Very well, I will do so," replied Raven.

They started toward the sky, where they arrived in a short time, and Man found himself in a beautiful country with a climate much better than that on earth; but the people who lived there were very small. When they stood beside Man, their heads reached only to his hips. As they walked along, Man looked about and saw many animals that were strange to him, and noticed that the country was much finer than the one he had left.

The people living there wore handsome fur garments nicely made and embroidered with ornamental patterns such as people on earth now wear. Man got the patterns, and when he came back to earth he showed his people how to make the handsome garments; and the patterns have been retained ever since.

After a time they came to a large house and went in. A very old man came from the place of honor opposite the door at the head of the room to welcome them.

“This is the first man I made in the sky land,” said Raven, explaining why the man seemed so old.

The old man called to his people: “We have here a guest from the lower land, who is a friend of mine. Bring food to refresh him after his travels.”

They brought boiled food of a more delicious kind than Man had ever tasted.

“That is the flesh of the spotted reindeer and the sheep that live in these mountains,” said Raven. “When you have finished your meal we will go on to see other things that I have made. But you must not attempt to drink from any of the lakes we may pass, for in them are animals which would seize and kill anyone from the lower land.”

On the way they came to a dry lake bed in which tall grass was growing very thickly, and lying on the very tips of the grass was a large animal, yet the grass did not bend with the weight. It was a strange-looking animal with a long head and six legs, the two hind ones unusually large; the forelegs short; and a small pair under its belly. The hair around the feet was very long, but all over the body there was fine, thick hair. From the back of the head grew short, thick horns which extended forward and curved back at the tips. The animal had small eyes, and was of darkish color, almost black.

“These animals can sink right into the ground and disappear,” said Raven. “When the people want to kill one of them, they have to put a log under it so it cannot sink. It takes many people to kill one, for when the animal falls on the lower log, other logs must be placed above it and held down, while two men take large clubs and beat it between the eyes till it is dead.”

Next they came to a round hole in the sky with a ring of short grass growing around the border and glowing like fire.

“This is a star called the Moon-dog,” said Raven.

“The tops of the grass blades have been cut away or have burned off,” said Man.

“Yes, my mother took some, and I took the rest to make the first fire down on earth,” said Raven. “I have tried to make some of this same kind of grass on earth, but it will not grow there.

“Now close your eyes and get upon my wings and I will take you to another place,” said Raven.

Man did as he was told, and they dropped through the flame-bordered star hole and floated down and down for a long time. They came to something that seemed denser than the air, and caused them to go more slowly, until they finally stopped.

“We are now standing on the bottom of the sea,” said Raven. “I came down here to make some new kinds of water animals. Looking through the water must look like a fog to you, but you must not walk about; you must lie down, and if you become tired you may turn over upon the other side.”

Raven then left Man lying on one side, where he rested for a long time. Finally he awoke feeling very tired, but when he tried to turn over, he could not.

“I wish I could turn over,” he said to himself; and in a moment he turned very easily.

But as he did this, he was horrified to see that his body had become covered with long, white hairs, and that his fingers had become long, sharp claws. However, he was so drowsy that he soon fell asleep again. After a long time he awoke and again felt tired from lying so long in one position. He turned as before and fell asleep again for the third time. When he awoke the fourth time Raven stood beside him.

“I have changed you into a white bear,” said Raven. “How do you like it?”

Man tried to answer but could not make a sound. Raven waved his magic wing over him and then he said:

“I do not wish to be a bear, for then I would have to live on the sea while my son would live on the shore, and I

would be unhappy.”

Raven made one stroke of his wings and the bearskin fell from Man and lay on one side, while he sat up in his human form, thankful that he did not have to spend the rest of his life as a polar bear.

Then Raven pulled a quill from his tail and put it into the empty bearskin for a backbone, and after he had waved his wings over it a white bear arose and walked slowly away; and ever since that time white bears have been found on the frozen seas.

“How many times did you turn over?” Raven asked.

“Four times,” answered Man.

“That was four years. You slept there just four years,” said Raven. “Come now and I will show you some of the animals I made while you slept.

“Here is one like the shrew-mouse of the land; but this one always lives on the ice of the sea, and whenever it sees a man it darts at him, entering the toe of his boot and crawling all over him. If the man keeps perfectly quiet, it will leave him unharmed. But if he is a coward, and lifts so much as a finger to brush it away, it instantly burrows into his flesh going directly to his heart and causing death.

“Here is another, a large leather-skinned animal with four long, wide-spreading arms. This is a fierce animal, living in the sea, which wraps its arms around a man or a kayak and pulls them into the water. If the man tries to escape by getting out of his kayak upon the ice and running away, it will dart underneath and break the ice under his feet. Or if he gets on the shore and runs, it burrows through the earth as easily as it swims through the water. No one can escape if once it pursues him.”

“Why did you make such an animal?” asked Man.

“This is like man’s own misdeeds, from which he cannot escape,” replied Raven.

Raven then showed Man several other animals: one somewhat like an alligator, another with a long scaly tail with which it could kill a man at one stroke; some walruses, and otter, and many kinds of fish. They finally came to a place where the shore rose before them, and the ripples on the surface of the water could be seen.

“Close your eyes and hold fast to me,” said Raven.

As soon as he had done this, Man found himself standing on the shore near his home, and was very much astonished to see a large village where he had left only a few huts. His wife had become an old woman and his son was an old man. The people saw him and welcomed him back, making him their Headman, and giving him the place of honor in their gatherings. He told them all he had seen and heard since he left them, and taught the young men many things about the sea animals.

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