



The Youth and the Dog-Dance

Canadian Fairy Tales

Canadian Native American North American

Intermediate
5 min read

Once long ago, when the Indians dwelt in the country in the north-west, a youth went far away from his native village to catch birds. His people lived near a lake where only small birds nested, and as he wanted large and bright-colored feathers for his arrows and his bonnet he had to go far into the forest, where larger birds of brilliant plumage lived. When he reached the Land of Many Feathers far in the north country, he dug a pit on the top of a high hill. Then he covered the pit with poles and over the poles he spread grass and leaves so that the place looked like the earth around it. He put meat and corn on the grass, and tied the food to the poles so that the birds could not carry it away. Then he climbed down into the pit and waited for the birds to come, when he could reach up and catch them by the feet and kill them.

All day long and far into the night the youth waited for birds, but no birds came. Towards morning he heard a distant sound like that of a partridge drumming. But the sound did not come nearer. The next night, as the youth watched and waited in the pit, he heard the same sound, and he said, "I will see where the noise comes from and I will discover the cause, for it is not a partridge, and it is very strange." So he climbed out of the pit and went in the direction of the sound. He walked along rapidly through the forest until he came at dawn to the shore of a large lake.

The drumming came from somewhere in the lake, but as he stood listening to it, the sound suddenly stopped.

The next night the youth heard the drumming louder than before. Again he went to the lake. The sound was again distinct as it rose from the water, and when he looked he saw great numbers of birds and animals swimming in the lake in the moonlight. But there was no explanation of the strange sound. As he sat watching the animals and birds, he prayed to his guardian spirit to tell him the cause of the drumming. Soon an old man came along. He was old and bent and wrinkled, but his eyes were kind. The youth gave him some tobacco and they sat down together on the edge of the lake and watched the swimmers in the dim light, and smoked their pipes.

“What are you doing here?” asked the old man. “I am trying to learn the cause of the strange drumming,” said the youth.

“You do well indeed to seek it,” said the old man, “and to seek to know the cause of all things. Only in that way will you be great and wise. But remember there are some things the cause of which you can never find.”

“Where have you come from?” said the boy.

“Oh,” said the man, “I lived once upon a time like you in the Country of Fancy where great Dreams dwell, and indeed I live there still, but your dreams are all of the future while mine are of the past. But some day you too will change and your thoughts will be like mine.”

“Tell me the cause of the drumming,” said the boy.

And the old man said, “Take this wand that I will give you and wave it before you go to sleep, and maybe you will see strange things.” Then he gave the boy a wand and disappeared into the forest and the boy never saw him again. The boy waved the wand and fell asleep on the sand as the old man had told him. When he awoke he found himself in a large room in the midst of many people. Some of them were dancing gracefully, and some sat around and talked. They wore wonderful robes of skins and feathers, of many different colours. The boy wished he could get such feathers for his own clothes and his bonnet. But as he looked at the people he was suddenly aware that they were none other than the animals and birds he had seen for two nights swimming in the lake in the moonlight. They were now changed into human form, through some strange and miraculous power. They were very kind to the youth and treated him with great courtesy.

At last the dancing ceased and the talking stopped, and one who seemed to be the Chief stood up at the end of

the room and said, "Oh, young stranger, the Great Spirit has heard your prayers, and because of your magic wand we have been sent to you in these shapes. The creatures you see here are the animals and birds of the world. I am the Dog, whom the Great Spirit loves well. I have much power, and my power I shall give to you, and I shall always protect you and guard you. And even if you should treat me with cruelty, I shall never be unfaithful to you, nor shall I ever be unkind. But you must take this Dance home with you and teach it to your people and they must celebrate the Dance once a year." Then he taught the youth the secrets of their Dance.

When the youth had learned the Dance, the Chief turned to his companions and said, "My comrades and brothers, I have taught the young stranger the secrets of the Dance. I have given him my own power. Will you not have pity on a creature from earth and give him some of the power of which you too are possessed?"

For a long time no one spoke, but at last Owl arose and said, "I too will help him. I have power to see far in the darkness, and to hunt by night. When he goes out at night I will be near him and he shall see a great distance. I give him these feathers to fasten in his hair." And the Owl gave him a bunch of feathers, which the youth tied to his head.

Then Buffalo came forward and said, "I too will help him. I will give him my endurance and my strength, and my power to trample my enemies underfoot. And I give him this belt of tanned buffalo-hide to wear when he goes to war." And he gave the youth a very wondrous belt to fasten around his waist.

The animals and birds, one after the other, gave him gladly of their power. Porcupine gave him quills with which to decorate his leather belt and his bonnet, and he said, "I too will aid you, and when you make war I will be near you. I can make my enemies as weak as children, and they always flee when I approach, for they fear the shooting of my quills. When you meet your foes you will always overcome them, for I give you power as it was given to me."

And Bear said, "I will give you my toughness and my strength, and a strip of fur for your leather belt and your coat. And when you are in danger, I will not be far away."

Then Deer said, "I give you my swiftness so that you may be fleet of foot. And when you pursue your enemies you will always overtake them, and should you flee from them, you will always out-run them in the race."

Then the birds spoke again, and Crane said, "I give you a bone from my wing to make a war-whistle to frighten

your enemies away or to summon your people to your assistance when you need them. And I give you my wings for your head-dress.”

The giant Eagle then spoke and said, “Oh, youth, I will be with you wherever you go, and I will give you my strength and my power in war. And even as I do, you will always see your enemies from afar, and you can always escape them if you so desire.” And he gave him a large bunch of wonderful eagle feathers to tie in his hair as a token of his fidelity.

And finally, Wild-Cat said, “I give you my power to crawl stealthily through the grass and the underbrush and to spring unexpectedly on your foes and take them unawares. And I give you too my power of hiding from my enemies.” And he gave him strips of his fur to decorate his clothing in token of his friendship.

From all the animals and the birds the youth received power and gifts. Then he waved his magic wand and lay down to sleep. When he awoke, he found himself on the shore of the lake, and far in the east the dawn was breaking. But he could see farther than he had ever seen before, and away in the distance he could make out blue hills and smoke rising from far-off villages. And he knew that strange power was upon him. But not a sound came from the lake, and the drumming had for ever ended.

The youth took his magic wand and his gifts and set out for his home. And he told his people what had happened and he taught them the secrets of the Dance which was to make them strong and victorious in war. And among his people it became a great ceremony and was practiced for long ages, and was known as the Dog-Dance. And since that time, the animals and birds have been friends to the Indians, and the Indians have acquired much of their cunning and skill and power. And ever after the night of moonlight by the lake when the youth with the magic wand received the strange gifts, the Indians have decorated their war clothes with fur and quills and feathers from the animals and the birds. And in the far north country, the Dog-Dance is still held at intervals out of gratitude for the gifts, for the Indians do not forget the promise of long ago.

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