Iktomi and the Fawn

Zitkala-Ša

IN one of his wanderings through the wooded lands, Iktomi saw a rare bird sitting high in a tree-top. Its long fan-like tail feathers had caught all the beautiful colors of the rainbow. Handsome in the glistening summer sun sat the bird of rainbow plumage. Iktomi hurried hither with his eyes fast on the bird.

He stood beneath the tree looking long and wistfully at the peacock's bright feathers. At length he heaved a sigh and began: “Oh, I wish I had such pretty feathers! How I wish I were not I! If only I were a handsome feathered creature how happy I would be! I'd be so glad to sit upon a very high tree and bask in the summer sun like you!” said he suddenly, pointing his bony finger up toward the peacock, who was eyeing the stranger below, turning his head from side to side.

“I beg of you make me into a bird with green and purple feathers like yours!” implored Iktomi, tired now of playing the brave in beaded buckskins. The peacock then spoke to Iktomi: “I have a magic power. My touch will change you in a moment into the most beautiful peacock if you can keep one condition.”

“Yes! yes!” shouted Iktomi, jumping up and down, patting his lips with his palm, which caused his voice to vibrate in a peculiar fashion. “Yes! yes! I could keep ten conditions if only you would change me into a bird with long, bright tail feathers. Oh, I am so ugly! I am so tired of being myself! Change me! Do!”

Hereupon the peacock spread out both his wings, and scarce moving them, he sailed slowly down upon the ground. Right beside Iktomi he alighted. Very low in Iktomi's ear the peacock whispered, “Are you willing to keep one condition, though hard it be?”

“Yes! yes! I've told you ten of them if need be!” exclaimed Iktomi, with some impatience.

“Then I pronounce you a handsome feathered bird. No longer are you Iktomi the mischief-maker.” Saying this the peacock touched Iktomi with the tips of his wings.

Iktomi vanished at the touch. There stood beneath the tree two handsome peacocks. While one of the pair strutted about with a head turned aside as if dazzled by his own bright-tinted tail feathers, the other bird soared slowly upward. He sat quiet and unconscious of his gay plumage. He seemed content to perch there on a large limb in the warm sunshine.

After a little while the vain peacock, dizzy with his bright colors, spread out his wings and lit on the same branch with the elder bird.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, “how hard to fly! Brightly tinted feathers are handsome, but I wish they were light enough to fly!” Just there the elder bird interrupted him. “That is the one condition. Never try to fly like other birds. Upon the day you try to fly you shall be changed into your former self.”

“Oh, what a shame that bright feathers cannot fly into the sky!” cried the peacock. Already he grew restless. He longed to soar through space. He yearned to fly above the trees high upward to the sun.

“Oh, there I see a flock of birds flying thither! Oh! oh!” said he, flapping his wings, “I must try my wings! I am tired of bright tail feathers. I want to try my wings.”

“No, no!” clucked the elder bird. The flock of chattering birds flew by with whirring wings. “Oop! oop!” called some to their mates.

Possessed by an irrepressible impulse the Iktomi peacock called out, “He! I want to come! Wait for me!” and with that he gave a lunge into the air. The flock of flying feathers wheeled about and lowered over the tree whence came the peacock's cry. Only one rare bird sat on the tree, and beneath, on the ground, stood a brave in brown buckskins.

“I am my old self again!” groaned Iktomi in a sad voice. “Make me over, pretty bird. Try me this once again!” he pleaded in vain.

“Old Iktomi wants to fly! Ah! We cannot wait for him!” sang the birds as they flew away.

Muttering unhappy vows to himself, Iktomi had not gone far when he chanced upon a bunch of long slender arrows. One by one they rose in the air and shot a straight line over the prairie. Others shot up into the blue sky and were soon lost to sight. Only one was left. He was making ready for his flight when Iktomi rushed upon him and wailed, “I want to be an arrow! Make me into an arrow! I want to pierce the blue Blue overhead. I want to strike yonder summer sun in its center. Make me into an arrow!”

“Can you keep a condition? One condition, though hard it be?” the arrow turned to ask.

“Yes! Yes!” shouted Iktomi, delighted.

Hereupon the slender arrow tapped him gently with his sharp flint beak. There was no Iktomi, but two arrows stood ready to fly. “Now, young arrow, this is the one condition. Your flight must

always be in a straight line. Never turn a curve nor jump about like a young fawn," said the arrow magician. He spoke slowly and sternly.

At once he set about to teach the new arrow how to shoot in a long straight line.

"This is the way to pierce the Blue overhead," said he; and off he spun high into the sky.

While he was gone a herd of deer came trotting by. Behind them played the young fawns together. They frolicked about like kittens. They bounced on all fours like balls. Then they pitched forward, kicking their heels in the air. The Iktomi arrow watched them so happy on the ground. Looking quickly up into the sky, he said in his heart, "The magician is out of sight. I'll just romp and frolic with these fawns until he returns. Fawns! Friends, do not fear me. I want to jump and leap with you. I long to be happy as you are," said he. The young fawns stopped with stiff legs and stared at the speaking arrow with large brown wondering eyes. "See! I can jump as well as you!" went on Iktomi. He gave one tiny leap like a fawn. All of a sudden the fawns snorted with extended nostrils at what they beheld. There among them stood Iktomi in brown buckskins, and the strange talking arrow was gone.

"Oh! I am myself. My old self!" cried Iktomi, pinching himself and plucking imaginary pieces out of his jacket.

"Hin-hin-hin! I wanted to fly!"

The real arrow now returned to the earth. He alighted very near Iktomi. From the high sky he had seen the fawns playing on the green. He had seen Iktomi make his one leap, and the charm was broken. Iktomi became his former self.

"Arrow, my friend, change me once more!" begged Iktomi.

"No, no more," replied the arrow. Then away he shot through the air in the direction his comrades had flown.

By this time the fawns gathered close around Iktomi. They poked their noses at him trying to know who he was.

Iktomi's tears were like a spring shower. A new desire dried them quickly away. Stepping boldly to the largest fawn, he looked closely at the little brown spots all over the furry face.

"Oh, fawn! What beautiful brown spots on your face! Fawn, dear little fawn, can you tell me how those brown spots were made on your face?"

“Yes,” said the fawn. “When I was very, very small, my mother marked them on my face with a red hot fire. She dug a large hole in the ground and made a soft bed of grass and twigs in it. Then she placed me gently there. She covered me over with dry sweet grass and piled dry cedars on top. From a neighbor's fire she brought hither a red, red ember. This she tucked carefully in at my head. This is how the brown spots were made on my face.”

“Now, fawn, my friend, will you do the same for me? Won't you mark my face with brown, brown spots just like yours?” asked Iktomi, always eager to be like other people.

“Yes. I can dig the ground and fill it with dry grass and sticks. If you will jump into the pit, I'll cover you with sweet smelling grass and cedar wood,” answered the fawn.

“Say,” interrupted Ikto, “will you be sure to cover me with a great deal of dry grass and twigs? You will make sure that the spots will be as brown as those you wear.”

“Oh, yes. I'll pile up grass and willows once oftener than my mother did.”

“Now let us dig the hole, pull the grass, and gather sticks,” cried Iktomi in glee.

Thus with his own hands he aids in making his grave. After the hole was dug and cushioned with grass, Iktomi, muttering something about brown spots, leaped down into it. Lengthwise, flat on his back, he lay. While the fawn covered him over with cedars, a far-away voice came up through them, “Brown, brown spots to wear forever!” A red ember was tucked under the dry grass. Off scampered the fawns after their mothers; and when a great distance away they looked backward. They saw a blue smoke rising, writhing upward till it vanished in the blue ether.

“Is that Iktomi's spirit?” asked one fawn of another.

“No! I think he would jump out before he could burn into smoke and cinders,” answered his comrade.

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