Iktomi and the Muskrat

Zitkala-Ša

BESIDE a white lake, beneath a large grown willow tree, sat Iktomi on the bare ground. The heap of smouldering ashes told of a recent open fire. With ankles crossed together around a pot of soup, Iktomi bent over some delicious boiled fish.

Fast he dipped his black horn spoon into the soup, for he was ravenous. Iktomi had no regular meal times. Often when he was hungry he went without food.

Well hid between the lake and the wild rice, he looked nowhere save into the pot of fish. Not knowing when the next meal would be, he meant to eat enough now to last some time.

“How, how, my friend!” said a voice out of the wild rice. Iktomi started. He almost choked with his soup. He peered through the long reeds from where he sat with his long horn spoon in mid-air.

“How, my friend!” said the voice again, this time close at his side. Iktomi turned and there stood a dripping muskrat who had just come out of the lake.

“Oh, it is my friend who startled me. I wondered if among the wild rice some spirit voice was talking. How, how, my friend!” said Iktomi. The muskrat stood smiling. On his lips hung a ready “Yes, my friend,” when Iktomi would ask, “My friend, will you sit down beside me and share my food?”

That was the custom of the plains people. Yet Iktomi sat silent. He hummed an old dance-song and beat gently on the edge of the pot with his buffalo-horn spoon. The muskrat began to feel awkward before such lack of hospitality and wished himself under water.

After many heart throbs Iktomi stopped drumming with his horn ladle, and looking upward into the muskrat's face, he said:

“My friend, let us run a race to see who shall win this pot of fish. If I win, I shall not need to share it with you. If you win, you shall have half of it.” Springing to his feet, Iktomi began at once to tighten the belt about his waist.

“My friend Ikto, I cannot run a race with you! I am not a swift runner, and you are nimble as a deer. We shall not run any race together,” answered the hungry muskrat.

For a moment Iktomi stood with a hand on his long protruding chin. His eyes were fixed upon something in the air. The muskrat looked out of the corners of his eyes without moving his head. He watched the wily Iktomi concocting a plot.

“Yes, yes,” said Iktomi, suddenly turning his gaze upon the unwelcome visitor; “I shall carry a large stone on my back. That will slacken my usual speed; and the race will be a fair one.”

Saying this he laid a firm hand upon the muskrat's shoulder and started off along the edge of the lake. When they reached the opposite side Iktomi pried about in search of a heavy stone.

He found one half-buried in the shallow water. Pulling it out upon dry land, he wrapped it in his blanket.

“Now, my friend, you shall run on the left side of the lake, I on the other. The race is for the boiled fish in yonder kettle!” said Iktomi.

The muskrat helped to lift the heavy stone upon Iktomi's back. Then they parted. Each took a narrow path through the tall reeds fringing the shore. Iktomi found his load a heavy one. Perspiration hung like beads on his brow. His chest heaved hard and fast.

He looked across the lake to see how far the muskrat had gone, but nowhere did he see any sign of him. “Well, he is running low under the wild rice!” said he. Yet as he scanned the tall grasses on the lake shore, he saw not one stir as if to make way for the runner. “Ah, has he gone so fast ahead that the disturbed grasses in his trail have quieted again?” exclaimed Iktomi. With that thought he quickly dropped the heavy stone. “No more of this!” said he, patting his chest with both hands.

Off with a springing bound, he ran swiftly toward the goal. Tufts of reeds and grass fell flat under his feet. Hardly had they raised their heads when Iktomi was many paces gone.

Soon he reached the heap of cold ashes. Iktomi halted stiff as if he had struck an invisible cliff. His black eyes showed a ring of white about them as he stared at the empty ground. There was no pot of boiled fish! There was no water-man in sight! “Oh, if only I had shared my food like a real Dakota, I would not have lost it all! Why did I not know the muskrat would run through the water? He swims faster than I could ever run! That is what he has done. He has laughed at me for carrying a weight on my back while he shot hither like an arrow!”

Crying thus to himself, Iktomi stepped to the water's brink. He stooped forward with a hand on each bent knee and peeped far into the deep water.

“There!” he exclaimed, “I see you, my friend, sitting with your ankles wound around my little pot of fish! My friend, I am hungry. Give me a bone!”

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed the water-man, the muskrat. The sound did not rise up out of the lake, for it came down from overhead. With his hands still on his knees, Iktomi turned his face upward into the great willow tree. Opening wide his mouth he begged, “My friend, my friend, give me a bone to gnaw!”

“Ha! ha!” laughed the muskrat, and leaning over the limb he sat upon, he let fall a small sharp bone which dropped right into Iktomi's throat. Iktomi almost choked to death before he could get it out. In the tree the muskrat sat laughing loud. “Next time, say to a visiting friend, 'Be seated beside me, my friend. Let me share with you my food.'”

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