The Toad and the Boy

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THE water-fowls were flying over the marshy lakes. It was now the hunting season. Indian men, with bows and arrows, were wading waist deep amid the wild rice. Near by, within their wigwams, the wives were roasting wild duck and making down pillows.

In the largest teepee sat a young mother wrapping red porcupine quills about the long fringes of a buckskin cushion. Beside her lay a black-eyed baby boy cooing and laughing. Reaching and kicking upward with his tiny hands and feet, he played with the dangling strings of his heavy-beaded bonnet hanging empty on a tent pole above him.

At length the mother laid aside her red quills and white sinew-threads. The babe fell fast asleep. Leaning on one hand and softly whispering a little lullaby, she threw a light cover over her baby. It was almost time for the return of her husband.

Remembering there were no willow sticks for the fire, she quickly girdled her blanket tight about her waist, and with a short-handled ax slipped through her belt, she hurried away toward the wooded ravine. She was strong and swung an ax as skillfully as any man. Her loose buckskin dress was made for such freedom. Soon carrying easily a bundle of long willows on her back, with a loop of rope over both her shoulders, she came striding homeward.

Near the entrance way she stooped low, at once shifting the bundle to the right and with both hands lifting the noose from over her head. Having thus dropped the wood to the ground, she disappeared into her teepee. In a moment she came running out again, crying, “My son! My little son is gone!” Her keen eyes swept east and west and all around her. There was nowhere any sign of the child.

Running with clinched fists to the nearest teepees, she called: “Has any one seen my baby? He is gone! My little son is gone!”

“Hinnu! Hinnu!” exclaimed the women, rising to their feet and rushing out of their wigwams.

“We have not seen your child! What has happened?” queried the women.

With great tears in her eyes the mother told her story.

“We will search with you,” they said to her as she started off.

They met the returning husbands, who turned about and joined in the hunt for the missing child. Along the shore of the lakes, among the high-grown reeds, they looked in vain. He was nowhere to be found. After many days and nights the search was given up. It was sad, indeed, to hear the mother wailing aloud for her little son.

It was growing late in the autumn. The birds were flying high toward the south. The teepees around the lakes were gone, save one lonely dwelling.

Till the winter snow covered the ground and ice covered the lakes, the wailing woman's voice was heard from that solitary wigwam. From some far distance was also the sound of the father's voice singing a sad song.

Thus ten summers and as many winters have come and gone since the strange disappearance of the little child. Every autumn with the hunters came the unhappy parents of the lost baby to search again for him.

Toward the latter part of the tenth season when, one by one, the teepees were folded and the families went away from the lake region, the mother walked again along the lake shore weeping. One evening, across the lake from where the crying woman stood, a pair of bright black eyes peered at her through the tall reeds and wild rice. A little wild boy stopped his play among the tall grasses. His long, loose hair hanging down his brown back and shoulders was carelessly tossed from his round face. He wore a loin cloth of woven sweet grass. Crouching low to the marshy ground, he listened to the wailing voice. As the voice grew hoarse and only sobs shook the slender figure of the woman, the eyes of the wild boy grew dim and wet.

At length, when the moaning ceased, he sprang to his feet and ran like a nymph with swift outstretched toes. He rushed into a small hut of reeds and grasses.

“Mother! Mother! Tell me what voice it was I heard which pleased my ears, but made my eyes grow wet!” said he, breathless.

“Han, my son,” grunted a big, ugly toad. “It was the voice of a weeping woman you heard. My son, do not say you like it. Do not tell me it brought tears to your eyes. You have never heard me weep. I can please your ear and break your heart. Listen!” replied the great old toad.

Stepping outside, she stood by the entrance way. She was old and badly puffed out. She had reared a large family of little toads, but none of them had aroused her love, nor ever grieved her. She had heard the wailing human voice and marveled at the throat which produced the strange sound. Now, in her great desire to keep the stolen boy awhile longer, she ventured to cry as the Dakota woman does. In a gruff, coarse voice she broke forth:

“Hin-hin, doe-skin! Hin-hin, Ermine, Ermine! Hin-hin, red blanket, with white border!”

Not knowing that the syllables of a Dakota's cry are the names of loved ones gone, the ugly toad mother sought to please the boy's ear with the names of valuable articles. Having shrieked in a torturing voice and mouthed extravagant names, the old toad rolled her tearless eyes with great satisfaction. Hopping back into her dwelling, she asked:

“My son, did my voice bring tears to your eyes? Did my words bring gladness to your ears? Do you not like my wailing better?”

“No, no!” pouted the boy with some impatience. “I want to hear the woman's voice! Tell me, mother, why the human voice stirs all my feelings!”

The toad mother said within her breast, “The human child has heard and seen his real mother. I cannot keep him longer, I fear. Oh, no, I cannot give away the pretty creature I have taught to call me 'mother' all these many winters.”

“Mother,” went on the child voice, “tell me one thing. Tell me why my little brothers and sisters are all unlike me.”

The big, ugly toad, looking at her pudgy children, said: “The eldest is always best.”

This reply quieted the boy for a while. Very closely watched the old toad mother her stolen human son. When by chance he started off alone, she shoved out one of her own children after him, saying: “Do not come back without your big brother.”

Thus the wild boy with the long, loose hair sits every day on a marshy island hid among the tall reeds. But he is not alone. Always at his feet hops a little toad brother. One day an Indian hunter, wading in the deep waters, spied the boy. He had heard of the baby stolen long ago.

“This is he!” murmured the hunter to himself as he ran to his wigwam. “I saw among the tall reeds a black-haired boy at play!” shouted he to the people.

At once the unhappy father and mother cried out, “'Tis he, our boy!” Quickly he led them to the lake. Peeping through the wild rice, he pointed with unsteady finger toward the boy playing all unawares.

“'Tis he! 'tis he!” cried the mother, for she knew him.

In silence the hunter stood aside, while the happy father and mother caressed their baby boy grown tall.

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