
The Tale of The Northern Lights

One autumn day in old times a woman and her infant son were lost in the Canadian woods. The woman was going back to her home from a long journey, and in some strange way she wandered from the path. The more she walked about, the more confused she became, and for many days she searched for the right road, but she could not find it. All the time she lived on berries and on the little food she carried. At last she found a cave in the woods, and she decided to use it for a home. She had not been long in the cave when a large bear came in, and she knew then that she had taken refuge in a bear's den. She thought the bear would kill her and her child. But the bear was good. He looked upon them as his own kind and soon they all became friends. The bear hunted during the day, and each night he brought to the cave much meat, which the woman cooked. So they lived comfortably through the long winter.

After a time the woman's child grew to be a very strong boy. The bear taught him to wrestle, and after a few weeks' practice the boy could throw down his teacher. And the mother said, "He will be a great warrior," for she knew that his strength was more than human. When the boy grew large and strong enough to take care of his mother, they decided to try to find the way back to their old home. So one day they said goodbye to the bear, and set out on their journey. After many hardships and dangers they reached their native village where the people, who had thought them dead, received them with great rejoicing. The boy continued to grow in strength until the people said they had never seen anyone so powerful. There was no limit to his strength.

One day the boy said to his mother, "I am going to travel far away until I find other men who are as strong as I am. Then my strength will be tested and I will come back to you." His mother agreed that he should go, and one morning he set out on his strange journey. He came to the bank of a river, and there he saw a man standing not far ahead of him. As he looked, a large canoe came drifting down the river, filled with people. They had lost their paddles. One of the people called to the man on the bank



and asked him to help them to land. The man put out a long pole and placed the end of it under the canoe, and lifted the canoe and all the people to the beach. "There," thought the boy, "is a man as strong as I am." Then the boy ran to the spot and picked up the canoe full of people and carried it up to the bank. He spoke to the man and told him of his own great strength. Then he said, "We are two strong men. Let us go along together until we find a third man as strong as we are." The man agreed, and he went along with the boy. They travelled far that day, and in the afternoon they came to a country of high rocky hills. It was a lonely and silent place, and no people seemed to be living in it. At last they saw a man rolling a large stone up the side of a mountain. The stone was as large as a house, and the mountain was very steep, but the man rolled the stone up with ease. He had rolled it half way up when the two strangers came along. The boy picked up the stone and threw it to the top of the mountain without difficulty. And the roller-man looked at them with great wonder. Then the boy told him of the strength of himself and his comrade, and said, "We are three strong men. Let us go hunting together." The man agreed, and the three went along together.

They built a house for themselves, to live in while they hunted. They agreed that only two of them should go away at once to hunt, and that the other should stay at home to look after the place and to prepare the evening meal. They decided that each should stay at home in his turn. The next day, the man of the river bank who had lifted the canoe stayed at home. Towards evening he got ready for the coming of his comrades, and he cooked a good meal to have waiting for them. Just as he had finished cooking it, a small

boy came in and asked for food. He was very small and worn and ragged, and the man pitied him and told him to eat what he wanted. The boy ate and ate until he had eaten all the food prepared for the three strong men. Then he went away and disappeared in the side of the mountain. When the two hunters came home they were very hungry, and they were cross when they heard that their meal had all been eaten up. And they vowed vengeance on the little glutton who had taken all their food.

The next day it was the turn of the stone-rolling man to stay at home. In the evening he cooked a good meal for himself and his comrades. But before the hunters came home, the little boy came in again and asked for food. He looked so small and worn and he cried so bitterly that the man did not have the heart to send him away, and he told him to eat what he wanted. The boy ate and ate until not a scrap of food was left. Then he laughed and went out and disappeared in the mountain. When the two hunters came home, they were again very cross to find that their food had all been eaten up by a tiny boy.

The next day the strong boy stayed at home, while the canoe-lifter and the stone-roller went hunting. In the evening the small boy came again, just as he had done on the two previous days. He wept and asked for food. The strong boy told him to eat what he wanted. He ate and ate as before, until he had eaten up the whole meal. Then he got up to go out. But the strong boy caught him and held him fast. There was a long struggle, for the tiny boy was very powerful, and he was almost a match for the strong boy. But at last he was thrown down, and he pleaded for his life. The strong boy said he would spare him on condition that he would take him to his home. He wanted to see what kind of a place he lived in. And the small boy agreed. Then the strong boy went with him to the side of the mountain. When they reached it, the little boy said, "I am the servant of a terrible giant, who has never been defeated in battle. I think you can overcome him. Take this stick and beat him with it, for it is the only thing that can give him pain." Then he gave him a stick that lay on the ground, and they went on to the giant's cave in the side of the hill. When they went in, the giant sprang upon the strong boy.

There was a long fight. It lasted for a whole day, and at last the strong boy overcame the giant and beat him dead with the magic stick. Then the little boy said, "I will reward you for freeing me from my terrible master. I have three beautiful sisters, and you may have whichever one you want for your wife." He took the strong boy to his home in a cave far down in a valley on the other side of a mountain, and there they found the three beautiful girls. The strong boy took the youngest one for himself, and he took the other two for his two comrades. When they came out of the cave, the strong boy found that they would have a very hard path to climb up the steep side of the mountain.



Then luckily, as he thought, he saw his two strong comrades standing on the top of the high cliff far above him. They saw him and the three girls far below them. He called to them to let down a rope, and said, "The three girls I have with me cannot climb the steep path. You must pull them up." So the men above let down a strong cord and the strong boy sent up the two oldest girls first, one at a time. Then, before sending up his own choice, the youngest, he thought he would test the loyalty of his comrades. They were standing far back from the top of the cliff, holding the rope, and they could not see the boy and the girl below. The boy tied a heavy stone to the end of the rope, and called, "I am going up next. Pull away." The men pulled and pulled until they had drawn the weight near the top of the cliff. Then they cut the rope, and down crashed the stone to the bottom of the cliff, where it broke into many pieces. The men above hoped that they had killed their comrade. They did not think that he had meant the two fairy wives for them, so they decided to kill him. But they were outwitted by the boy and the stone. "That is a fine way to reward my kindness," said the boy to his girl companion

when he saw the stone in pieces on the rocks. As he spoke he looked up and saw the two fairy girls running away from the two men above, who were left all alone. Then with the magic help of the little boy, the girls' brother, the strong boy at once punished the two men by making them follow the girls. They followed them on and on, but they never found them. And they still follow them; they wander always, and they are never at rest.

Then the strong boy left the little boy behind him to look after himself, and he took his fairy wife and climbed up the path and went to live far away in the forest. For a time they lived very happily. One day the boy said, "I am going back to my old home to see my people. You must wait here, and in a few days I shall come back." The girl did not want him to go; she feared he would forget her; but he told her that he must go. Then she said, "When you reach your home, a small black dog will meet you at the door. It will jump to lick your hand. But do not let it touch you. It is an evil spirit in disguise, and if it licks your hand you will forget all about me and you will not come back to me." The man promised to be on his guard, and he set out for his native place, leaving his wife behind him. Soon he reached his home, and as he opened the door, sure enough the black dog of which his wife had spoken jumped towards him. Before the strong boy could turn aside, the dog licked his hand as his wife had said. Then he forgot all about his old life in the forest, and he lived with never a thought of the fairy girl he had left behind him far away.

His wife waited long for him to come back. Then she knew that her husband had forgotten her because of the black dog, and late in the autumn she set out to find him. Soon she came to the place where he dwelt. It was morning, and she decided to hide until night, and then go to his home. She went to a stream that ran beside the village, and climbed into a tree that stretched out over the water. Near by was an old house in which an old man lived. The old man came to the brook for water, and as he bent down to fill his pail, he saw the face of the beautiful girl in the tree reflected in the stream. He called to her to come down from the tree. He had never seen a creature so lovely. He brought her to his tent and gave her

food, and he told her that her husband had gone far up the river to hunt. In the evening she went along the river to wait for her husband as he came home. When she saw him coming in his canoe, she sat on the bank of the stream and sang her magic song. It was a song of wonderful melody, such as only fairy maidens can sing, and the sound went far over the water and charmed all who heard it. When her husband heard the song, he stopped to listen. He soon knew that the music was that of his fairy wife of the forest, for no one else on earth could sing so wonderful a song. Then his old life in the forest came back to his mind, with memories of the two strong men and the tiny boy and the three fairy girls. And he remembered his wife to whom he had promised to return. Then he paddled his canoe to the bank, and found his wife, and they were happy again. It was a cold autumn night and the moon was full, and his wife said, "We must not stay here. This is a wicked place where men forget. If you stay here, you will forget me again." Then she shuddered when she thought that her husband might forget her again, and he shuddered when he thought that he might lose her again. And they continued to tremble in fear. Then she said, "We must go to another land. It is a more beautiful land than this. It is the Land of Eternal Memory where men and women never forget those they loved. I know where it is. We will go to it." Then she sang her magic song, and at once a great bird came through the air to where they sat. And still trembling in fear lest they should forget each other, they sprang to the bird's back, and the bird carried them up to the sky. And there they were changed into Northern Lights. And you can still see them, with their children around them, on autumn nights in the north country, beautiful in the northern sky. And they still tremble when they think of the Land of Forgetfulness they have left and of the pain it caused them in the old days of their youth.

This tale was published more than one hundred years ago and the source has been lost to us. For more Canadian Indigenous tales from *Canadian Wonder Tales* by Cyrus Macmillan (1918) go to: http://www.mainlesson.com/display.php?author=macmillan&book=wonder&story=_contents