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The Tales the Eskimos Tell of Themselves

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THAT strange dwarflike people of the frozen north, the Eskimo, have been thought by some to be the last descendants of the cavemen who roamed in western Europe toward the end of the ice age, and who, as the glacial sheet retreated, century after century, ever farther from the equator, followed it gradually until their present location in Greenland and Alaska, nearer the pole than any other nation, was reached. How the ancestors of the Eskimo, if this view is correct, traversed the Atlantic ocean from the European side to the American continent—whether on drifting ice floes or by a now submerged land bridge from Scotland or Norway via Iceland to Greenland—remains a mystery. But there is much known concerning both peoples, the ancient and the existing, that bears out the theory so strongly as to have led eminent scholars to accept it.

Both nations, though 10,000 years separate the past from the present, lived in an arctic climate at the edge of continental ice sheets. Both hunted the reindeer or its near kin, the caribou. Both carved tools and ornaments from ivory and bone with the greatest ingenuity. The modern Eskimo harpoon is paralleled by the prehistoric implement of the same type, of which numerous barbed heads have been preserved in the caves of France. But above all, a remarkable art development links the two people together. The famous etchings of mammoth, reindeer and horse from the Magdalenian deposits and layers of western Europe find their closest parallel among all living savage tribes in the carvings and engravings which the untutored Eskimo makes with such surpassing skill. The similarities are, indeed, striking, and to many convincing.

One other link can be added: The traditions and legends. The tales told by the Eskimo, particularly those of Greenland, resemble in their incidents, their character and their tenor the folk tales of European peoples far more closely than do the numerous legends of any of the tribes of American Indians. In the Indian traditions there is always something bizarre, something that appeals as grotesque. One feels immediately that the people who invented or repeated these stories must have had ways of thinking very different from our own.

The Eskimo legends, on the other hand, stand very close to those kept alive among civilized people. Of course, there are differences, too. There must necessarily be dissimilarities between the uncivilized and the civilized, and in spite of all their high ingenuity, the Eskimo were and are savages. Enchantments they understood and believed in, but castles and princes can not appear in their tales because they knew neither castles nor princes. The magic ring and the winged harp can also not be told of by their story makers, for they had neither rings nor harps. Much of the outward form is, therefore, strange and barbaric.

But when we look beyond the shell, the kernel and the spirit are quickly revealed as something familiar and kindred. Is it, then, merely an incident, a coincidence, that the Eskimo stand apart from all the Indian tribes of the continent and nearer to ourselves in what may well be called their literature? It seems hardly likely. Much more probable that something of the same methods of thought and expression prevailed among the ancient palaeolithic cave dwellers of Europe, and that from this common source both races, we by long residence of our ancestors on the same soil and in the same surroundings, the Eskimo, perhaps by direct descent or transmission, derived their similar narratives.

Viewing the Eskimo legends from this aspect, they become of interest not only for what they recall of our own folk traditions, but on account of their antiquity. Any or each of the specimens that follow may have an age of thousands of years—may be older, in fact, than many of the prehistoric bones and stone tools that geologists and archaeologists have dug from their resting places of a long past time.

THE GIANT

Many tales, told for amusement, but at least half believed in by the Eskimo, are narrated about Inukpan, an enormous giant, who is said to have been so large that a whole family of people could stand on one of his toes. For instance, once he lost the merest tip end of his boot lace. Some time later an Eskimo hunter came along and discovered the piece of leather, which he dragged home, joyful at his find, but with difficulty on account of its size. He was able to cover a whole kayak, or skin boat, with it, so big was it.

Once again Inukpan saw a troop of polar bears on the ice. "What pretty little foxes!" he cried in delight, and took them up to play with, for, like many of the giants of our own fairy tales, he was as stupid as he was well meaning. But his fingers were so tremendously clumsy that he crushed the fierce animals as we maim a fly in trying to handle it.

In fact, Inukpan usually intended well, and the only time he came near doing any damage to human beings was one day when he was out paddling and saw five Eskimo hunters in their boats. They made haste to get away, but with a few sweeps of his paddle he overtook them as if they were anchored and scooped them all, men and boats, up in his hand. He carried them to his house and there set them afloat in the bucket of drinking water he had hanging over his cooking lamp, and for a time watched them rowing around in it. When at last he grew tired and fell asleep, the five men then let themselves down to the ground by their long hunting lines, ran out of the enormous house, and escaped safely home, where they had much to tell of their remarkable adventure.

THE SWAN MAIDEN

Another story which has a parallel in European folk tales is that of the "Swan Maidens." But the practical Eskimo, knowing nothing of the poetical associations which cluster around our idea of this stately bird, and even less of the prosaic barnyard reminiscences of its nearest domestic relative, makes his legend deal with a woman in the form of a goose. This is the tale:

A young man on a journey came to a pond where he saw a strange and unexpected sight. A flock of wild geese were taking off their feather garments and disporting in the water in the form of human maidens. Moved by curiosity, the man cautiously crept up until he was able to rush forward and seize the heap of garments on the bank. One and all the girls began to beg for their feathery coverings, and gradually relenting before their entreaties, he returned them to one after another. Quickly each girl

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