

Legends of the Corn

Iroquois Legend

An old and honored chief went alone to the top of a high mountain to meet the Great Spirit. The chief told the Great Spirit that the red men were tired of the roots and herbs which, with the fruits that grew on the trees and the bushes, made up their food, and he asked the Father to send them some of the food used in the Happy Hunting-Grounds. The Great Spirit told the chief to take his wives and papooses and go forth in the moon of rains and stand on one of the plains, not moving from the place where they stopped for the space of three suns. Then the Great Spirit would come and give the Indians food. The chief went back to his people and told them what he had heard from the Great Spirit. When the moon of rains came they did as the chief had been directed. In three suns all had fallen asleep. They were left undisturbed by the Indians, for this peculiar manifestation was regarded as a mark of especial favor. In a few weeks the old chief and the members of his family had changed into luxuriant green plants. The council assembled, sent the wise men to visit the field, and what they found there was corn.

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Long and earnestly a young brave wooed a beautiful maiden, and at last gained her consent to live with him in his wigwam. But the days and nights were lonely without her and the young brave could not remain away from her lodge. Fearing that she might be stolen by one of her many admirers, or that danger might come to her, he slept at night in the forest that he might be near to protect her. One night he was awakened by a light footstep and, starting up, saw his loved one stealing out of her lodge as a sleep-walker. He pursued her, but, as if fleeing in her dreams from a danger that threatened her life, she ran from him, speeding through the paths like the fleet-footed hare. On and on he followed, and finally drew so near that he could hear her quick breath and the rapid beating of her heart. With all his remaining strength the lover sprang forward and clasped the maiden's form to his breast. What was his grief and astonishment when he found that his arms clasped, not the maiden he loved, but a strange plant the like of which he had never seen before. The maiden had awakened just as her lover overtook her, and had been so frightened at her surroundings that she was transformed. She had raised her arms to her head just as her lover caught her, and her uplifted hands were changed into ears of corn, and where her fingers caught her hair the maize bears beautiful silken threads.

The Great Mosquito

Iroquois Legend

An immense bird preyed upon the red men in all parts of the country. Their homes were at no time safe from its ravages. Often it would carry away children playing beside the wigwams, or, like a bolt of lightning, dart from the sky and strike a woman or man bleeding and dying to the earth. Whole fields of corn had been destroyed in a single night by its ravages, and its coming was so swift and terrible that the Indians hardly dared stir from the shelter of their houses. A strong party of Cayugas and Onondagas finally determined upon its death, no matter at what cost to themselves. A young warrior offered himself for the sacrifice. He was provided with a quantity of raw-hide thongs, and repaired to one of the open spaces, where it was believed the dreaded monster would discover and descend upon him. The young brave was to bind one of the thongs upon the bird's feet or upon some portion of its body, if possible, before he killed him, and then his companions, rushing from their place of concealment, would try to slay the enemy that had been snared with such difficulty. The preparations were elaborately made, and the young brave went forth on his dangerous mission. Three days he sat, chanting his death-song and awaiting the coming of his terrible fate. On the morning of the fourth day the sky was suddenly darkened and the watchers saw that the great bird was slowly circling above the heroic young Cayuga. He ceased his chanting, and, standing upright, shouted defiance to the almost certain death that awaited him.

With a scream that turned the hearts of the waiting Indians cold with terror, the bird dropped upon its victim like a panther on his prey. A short and terrible struggle took place and then the concealed warriors rushed forth to finish the work of their brave young companion, who had succeeded in throwing one of the thongs over the great mosquito's neck. They brought willing and ready hands to the battle, and the arrows poured upon the struggling mass like a storm of hail. After a long encounter the bird was killed, and the young Cayuga smiled in triumph as his last glance rested upon the dead body of the monster.

Runners were at once dispatched to the villages to inform the Indians of the victory, and soon vast numbers of them came to look upon their long-dreaded enemy that had been slain at such cost. Its body was larger than that of the largest bear they had ever seen, and the breadth of its outstretched wings was as great as the height of three men. Its talons were as long as arrows, and its monstrous beak was lined with sharp teeth. There was much rejoicing over the great mosquito's death, and for several days feasting and dancing were held in honor of the bravery of those who had rid the country of such a terrible scourge. Soon, however, swarms of the poisonous little flies that have been the pests of all nations since that time, infested the woods, and the Indians discovered that they came from the body of the dead bird. Too late they realized that the body of the great mosquito should have been burned when it was first slain, for fire is ever the destroyer of evil spirits.

Source:

Iroquois Legend. "The Great Mosquito." *Legends of the Iroquois*. New York: A. Wessels Company, 1902. 51 – 54. Electronic.

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