
Aleutian Stories

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ALEUTIAN STORIES.

I. THE SAD WOMAN.

BOTH the natives of Atka and Attu tell the following story, which was related to me by Mrs. C. A. Anderson, a native of Attu.

Many, many years ago the people of Atka and Attu were continually at war with each other, frequently surprising each other with fatal results. At this particular time, the Atka warriors gathered a large fleet of bidarkas, and one dark night fell on the Attu inhabitants, of whom but three escaped, two boys and a woman. The boys were soon discovered in the cave where they were hid and killed, but the woman was not found. After the victors had departed, the woman came out, and was painfully surprised to know that she was the only human being on the island. For seven years she lived in this solitary state, and during all this time neither smiled nor laughed. She lived mostly on sea-lions and sea-otters, which she killed with clubs while they were on the rocks. In the eighth year her sadness came to an end in the following manner. She had as companions a young duck and sea-gull whom she had befriended; one day, as she was fishing along the beach, these two birds began to fight, which so amused her that she laughed out. Not long after, some suitable driftwood came ashore, and she set about building a new home. While busily engaged with her stone hatchet in trimming a log, she thought she heard a noise behind her, and on looking around saw a man. This so frightened her that she cut off one of her fingers. A little later some more Atka people came over and settled in Attu, and they are the ancestors of the present inhabitants of that island.

Another ending of this same story is that this man and woman married, and that from them all the people of Attu are descended.

II. THE WOMAN WHO WAS FOND OF INTESTINES.

Once there lived an Aleut with his wife and little boy. The wife was very fond of intestines, and early each morning the husband would go out in his bidarka hunting, and return in the evening with a boat full of intestines which he gave to his wife, telling her to keep what she wanted for herself, and distribute the rest among her neighbors.

The wife was somewhat puzzled by the husband's actions; she could not understand why he went so early in the morning, where he got so many intestines, or his reasons for wishing to have them distributed among the villagers. She, of course, did not know that her husband had a mistress in the village whom he went to see while his wife was asleep, and that he desired the intestines distributed in

order that his wife's rival might have a share. All of a sudden, without explanations, the man ceased going out early, and when he did go, he came back but lightly loaded. This did not in the least clear up the mystery to the wife. But one day, when he had gone somewhat later than usually, his mistress called on his wife, whom she found busy sewing a kamalayka out of the intestines her husband brought. The two got into a conversation, and, among other questions, the mistress asked :—

“Does your husband love you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where he gets all the intestines?”

“No.”

“Can you guess why he has them distributed over the village?”

“No.”

“I will tell you,” said the mistress, “but you must not tell him I told you. Every day your husband goes to the village where your parents and relatives live and where you lived before your marriage, and kills the people there and brings their intestines to you. Yesterday there were but five people remaining in the village: your mother, your two sisters, and two brothers. He killed your mother and sisters yesterday, and to-day he went to bring the intestines of your brothers. He is in love with another woman of this village, whom he visits nightly when you have fallen asleep.”

With this parting shot she left the house, leaving the poor wife weeping so bitterly that the kamalayka was hot from her tears. For the rest of the day she did not stir from the house, but sat lamenting and sewing. Towards evening her little boy rushed in announcing the approach of his father, which she generally anticipated with pleasure, and always went down to the beach to meet him; but this time she neither answered nor made the least motion. A few minutes later the little son came again saying, “Father is here,” but all the reply he got was a new outburst of weeping.

Missing the usual meeting and greeting of his wife, the father asked the little boy where his mother was, and when told of the state she was in, he hastened to the house, where he found her on the floor shedding bitter tears and sewing the kamalayka.

“Why do you weep? has some one offended you?”

“No one has offended me.”

“Why then this lamentation?”

“I was thinking of my mother, sisters, and brothers, and my other relatives in my native village, and I wondered how they were getting along, and this made me weep.”

He did not attempt to cheer her, but after a pause he said, "I did not kill many animals to-day — two only." This enraged her so that she jumped up from the floor, picked up the little boy, who was near her, and threw him at him, saying, "If my two brothers do not satisfy you, take him also." The boy's forehead came in contact with the edge of a sharp knife on the father's breast, making quite a gash from which the blood flowed freely. This the mother noticed before escaping out of the house.

Putting aside the boy, the man made a dash for the woman, but she got out of his reach, and being the better runner of the two he did not succeed in laying hands on her. She would let him come up quite close to her, and then dash away again until he saw the hopelessness of the chase and gave it up.

In a short time the boy's wound healed, but it left a very noticeable scar. Now that his mother was gone, his father placed him in the care of his sister, with instructions that he should under no circumstances be allowed to go very far from home. In this manner he passed a few years longer, until he became the proud possessor of a bow and arrows, with which he often amused himself. One day, while indulging in his favorite sport, he began to wonder why his father and aunt forbade his going far from the house; and the more he thought about it the more anxious did he become to go, until he finally concluded "to go just a little distance beyond that hill to see what is there." On the way he noticed a hillock just ahead of him, at which he discharged his arrow, then ran and got it, aimed at another and another, and became so absorbed in this amusement that he did not observe how far from home it was taking him. One hillock somewhat different from the others especially attracted his attention as offering a good mark. He took aim and sent his arrow flying right into the centre of it; but what was his surprise on approaching the supposed hillock to discover that it was a barrabara, and that the arrow had gone inside through the hole in the top. When he peeped in, he was frightened at the sight of a very wild-looking woman who stared at him, and he began to cry. "Why do you cry?" the woman asked. "I want my arrow." "Come in and get it," the woman invited. But he was too scared to do that; he however got up courage enough to stick his foot in, hoping to draw it out that way, and he had nearly succeeded when he heard the woman move. At this he ran away in tears. The woman called him back, saying: "Do not be afraid of me. I am your mother. It is I who threw you at your father, making the scar on your forehead. Come in, I will not harm you." When he saw that it was really his mother, he went to her and remained with her two days. During that time she told him his father's wicked deeds, how he mistreated and neg-

lected her for another, and finally wrought on him so that he swore he would revenge her wrongs. She bade him go home, but attempt nothing for the present, and make no mention of what he had seen and heard.

During the boy's absence the father was away hunting, but the aunt was quite worked up over the long absence, and ran about the fields looking for him. When he returned she asked him all sorts of questions as to his whereabouts, but all the satisfaction she got from him was that he had lost his way and could not get back. She offered him food, which he refused to touch, and finally refused to answer her when spoken to. Toward evening of the same day his father returned, and, when told that the boy would neither eat nor drink, asked what was the matter with him; but for an answer the boy turned his back on him and went to sleep. The father then inquired of the aunt whether anything unusual had occurred and whether the boy had been far from home, and to all this she replied that all during his (father's) absence the boy's life had gone on as ordinarily, and that he was not out of sight of the house the whole time.

As the boy grew older he avoided his father more and more, and when he reached early manhood the father lost control over him and actually feared him. One day, while the older man was away hunting, the young man took his bow and arrows, some food and water, and set out to see his mother. Before going, he told his aunt that he intended going quite a distance from home, and not to be, therefore, uneasy over his long absence. He went to the place where he had last seen his mother, and, as she was not there, he wandered on until on the following day he came in sight of some barrabaras and two men. They answered him when he spoke to them, but when he wished to enter into one of the barrabaras they barred his way. While they were thus disputing, his mother appeared on the scene and motioned to the men to let him pass. When he came inside he was greatly surprised at the quantity of furs that was lying about in great disorder, and at the abundance of meats and other eatables that he found there. He was certain he had never seen anything like it before. After eating, his mother told him to spend the night there, and in the morning take as many of the best furs as he could carry and go back to the village of his father, in order to tempt him and his relatives to come hunting in this neighborhood, which would offer an opportunity to repay him for what he had done. The boy did as he was told, took with him a heavy load of precious furs, and started back.

In his absence, the mother and the people with whom she was living made elaborate and crafty preparations for the reception of the

expected guests. In the large barrabara, where the feasts and dances were always held and where visitors were generally received, quantities of oil were sprinkled about and covered up with grass. Along the walls seal-bladders full of oil were concealed, and screened with straw mats. And in this place the visitors were to be received.

The young man's father was home on his return, and received the present of furs which his son made him with much pleasure, for the boy seemed so kindly disposed that the father hoped that his natural affection for his parent had returned. He inquired the whereabouts of the hunting grounds where the son had secured these skins, and the latter told him that it was not very far, and that it was very rich, and that he planned to go back the next day to the same place, and if he and his men cared to accompany him, he would be glad to show them the way. His offer was accepted, and the following morning a large party left the village for the hunting ground.

Some of the people of the mother's village had been on the lookout, and when they saw the large party approaching, they changed themselves into wild beasts, — bears, wolves, foxes, etc. The hunters marked them and shot at them, but it had no other result than to drive the beasts nearer and nearer to the village. These tactics the men-beasts repeated until the hunters were decoyed into the village. Seeing so many barrabaras, the men asked the boy who the people were that lived in them. "They are friendly people," he replied, "with whom I spent the night the last time I was in this neighborhood. To-morrow morning we will go to the other side of the village, where there is a great deal of game." The people of the village greeted them very cordially, and assigned a place for the night to each one of them; the father and son were given the barrabara where the latter had been entertained on his previous visit. Although the mother was in the same room with them they were not aware of it, for she had concealed herself. Everywhere about them were scattered the richest furs, and the food before them was the choicest and best, and so much of it that it rather made the older man uneasy, for, though an old hunter, he had never seen anything like it before. In the evening all the people of the village, including the guests, went to the large dance-hall, where the formal reception was held and the guests entertained as was customary. One by one they descended through the hole in the roof, the only entrance there was. The interior was lighted up by two rows of stone lamps filled with oil, and grass wicks. On one side of the room sat the local men, while the visitors faced them from the other; the centre was occupied by the women, and on the two sides sat seven or eight men with drums in their hands, on which they played and accompanied their singing. They would take turns; first the local

men would sing their local songs, and then the visitors sang theirs. To this music the women danced with men whom they invited from either side.

Everything moved along smoothly and joyfully until the father recognized his wife among the women. She was dancing and moving towards him. At this sight he turned pale and looked for a way to get out, but the ladder had been removed. The woman moved up to him, grasped his hand, and dragged him to dance; but he resisted. The boy, who sat near, urged him and pushed him on, but all in vain. Then the woman began to sing him a song in which she went over all his misdeeds, his unfaithfulness, his cruelties, his falsehoods, as well as many of his other shortcomings, and concluded with these words, "You and your men shall never leave this place alive." When she had said this, all the local people, including the mother and son, were turned into birds or flying insects and flew out through the hole in the roof. The visitors, unable to follow them, remained behind. On the outside grass and wood were ignited and thrown in, which set on fire the grass and oil inside. Then the smoke hole was stopped up; and in this way all those who were inside were smothered to death. A few days later the son went to his father's village, destroying it as completely as his father had destroyed his mother's. He spared, however, his aunt, whom he brought back with him.

IV. THE MAN AND WOMAN WHO BECAME SEA-OTTERS.

This is also an Attu story told to me by Mrs. Anderson. With some few changes it is told everywhere among the Aleuts, and runs as follows:—

Once upon a time there lived in a certain village a married couple; and one day the husband told the wife, "We are going to make a feast, and we are going to invite your brother-in-law. Go and gather some herbs and roots, and then go to the beach and bring some moss from the rocks." He himself went to get some seals or ducks. On his return he busied himself preparing the dishes. This done, he sharpened his knives, and commanded his wife to call the expected guest. She knew that her husband was jealous of her brother-in-law and planned to kill him, but was forbidden by her husband to say anything to him about it. She went and called him; and as they were coming toward the house she, walking behind, thought continually of the fate that was awaiting him, yet fear of her husband prevented her from saying anything.

When they came into the house she looked at the two men and saw how much the handsomer of the two the brother-in-law was. The husband turned to the invited guest, and said: "I prepared a feast for you; I have planned it for many years. Come and eat with

me." They sat down on the floor, having the food before them in a hollowed rock. In the mean time the woman was outside, weeping because the man she loved more than her husband was about to be killed. The meal started off pleasantly, but the husband was watching his chance, and once when the brother-in-law had an unusually full mouth and could not defend himself he jumped on him, seized him by the throat, cut his head off, and said: "Now you have your feast."

This done he left the house and sat down among the rocks, waiting to see what his wife would do. She went in and picked up the head, washed it, put it into an intestine bag finely trimmed with sea-otter fur, and, after observing the whereabouts of her husband, started off with it towards the cliff near the house. She went quite a distance before her husband noticed her and started in pursuit, calling to her, "Where are you going?" She answered: "You will see which way I am going; you killed him and you will never see me again." As he increased his speed she began to run until she reached the top of the cliff, from which she threw herself into the water below. The husband arrived just in time to see her disappear. He stood there watching the spot, believing her drowned; but to his great surprise there emerged two sea-otters, and one went west while the other went east. He went back to the house, where he took his hunting gear and his bidarka and said, "I will end their lives and mine too." Saying this he launched his skin boat, got into it, and paddled away from the shore, while singing to himself:—

"I will end their life,
And I will end mine.
I hear the birds singing
That sing in the spring-time,
So I am going," etc.

And he upset his bidarka and drowned himself.

V. A SEA-OTTER STORY.

This story differs but little from the one before it, and was told me by an old Aleut of Belkofsky (Alaska Peninsula). I give all the versions I have of this same story in order to show how it differs from village to village.

In a certain place there lived a man with his wife and nephew. One day the man went away, and on his return learned that the two had dishonored him during his absence. When he went away a second time the woman said to the boy, "I will die when you die." On his return the man noticed a number of sticks (used as tools) and asked his wife, "Who made these for you?" "Your nephew," she replied, "made them." Observing some wooden clamps, he inquired

once more, "Who made these for you?" Again she answered, "Your nephew made them." Then the man began to prepare some roots for eating, and when he had finished he called to his wife and nephew to eat. The boy tried to eat the food, of which he was generally fond, but somehow he could not swallow it. This was so funny that it made the man and woman laugh. The man then upbraided the boy and his wife with their criminal conduct, and ended by cutting the boy's head off and giving it to the woman. She turned to it and said, "I promised that I would die with you and I will." Putting on her parka, she took the head and started for the bluff close to the sea. The husband, seeing the way she was going, started in pursuit, but she was already on the summit before he could come up to her. She waited until he was quite close and then turned to the head and repeated, "I said I would die with you and I will." This said, she threw herself off the bluff and disappeared in the water. The man stood there watching, and very soon he saw emerging two sea-otters who went out to sea.

VI. THE BROTHER AND SISTER WHO BECAME HAIR-SEALS.

This story was told me by the chief of Unga Island.

In a certain family there were twelve brothers and one sister. She lived in a hut away from the rest of the family. There were no other men living in the neighborhood, and so she was somewhat surprised when some man came to see her at night. She did not know who it was, but suspected that it was one of her brothers, and in order to find out which one of them it was, she prepared some red paint, and when the man was about to leave she dipped her hands into the paint and put them on his shoulders. The next day, as all her brothers were outside playing, she went among them and detected marks of paint on the shoulders of the oldest. Going back to her barrabara, she sharpened her knife and placed it alongside of her. That night, as usual, the man came and slept with her, but as he started to leave she threw her knife at him and cut the sinews of one of his legs. The following morning she went about her work as customary, when some one came to announce that her oldest brother was sick, the sinews of one of his legs being cut.

She went to him, got him out of bed, and set off with him. Their mother, learning the state of affairs, said, "We reared them that they might be a help to us and work for us; but now they have gone and ruined themselves." The two went a long distance until they arrived at the bluff, over which they threw themselves, and a short time after they appeared as hair-seals.

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