

**THE BOOK OF
NATURE MYTHS**



FROM THE WIGWAM OF THE GREAT SPIRIT

**THE BOOK OF
NATURE MYTHS**

BY

FLORENCE HOLBROOK

**YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS
CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA**

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This edition, first published in 2009 by Yesterday's Classics, an imprint of Yesterday's Classics, LLC, is an unabridged republication of the text originally published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company in 1902. For the complete listing of the books that are published by Yesterday's Classics, please visit www.yesterdaysclassics.com. Yesterday's Classics is the publishing arm of the Baldwin Online Children's Literature Project which presents the complete text of hundreds of classic books for children at www.mainlesson.com.

ISBN-10: 1-59915-313-0

ISBN-13: 978-1-59915-313-1

Yesterday's Classics, LLC
PO Box 3418
Chapel Hill, NC 27515

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PREFACE

IN preparing the Book of Nature Myths the desire has been to make a second reader which would be adapted to the child's interest, ability, and progress.

The subject-matter is of permanent value, culled from the folk-lore of the primitive races; the vocabulary, based upon that of the Hiawatha Primer, is increased gradually, and the new words and phrases will add to the child's power of expression. The naïve explanations of the phenomena of nature given by the primitive races appeal to the child's wonder about the same phenomena, and he is pleased and interested. These myths will gratify the child's desire for complete stories, and their intrinsic merit makes them valuable for oral reproduction.

The stories have been adapted to youthful minds from myths contained in the works of many students of folk-lore whose scholarship is undisputed. Special acknowledgment is due Miss Eva March Tappan for her valuable assistance in the final revision of the text.

THE STORY OF THE FIRST HUMMING-BIRD

PART I. THE GREAT FIRE-MOUNTAIN

LONG, long ago, when the earth was very young, two hunters were traveling through the forest. They had been on the track of a deer for many days, and they were now far away from the village where they lived. The sun went down and night came on. It was dark and gloomy, but over in the western sky there came a bright light.

“It is the moon,” said one.

“No,” said the other. “We have watched many and many a night to see the great, round moon rise above the trees. That is not the moon. Is it the northern lights?”

“No, the northern lights are not like this, and it is not a comet. What can it be?”

It is no wonder that the hunters were afraid, for the flames flared red over the sky like a wigwam on fire. Thick, blue smoke floated above the flames and hid the shining stars.

“Do the flames and smoke come from the wigwam of the Great Spirit?” asked one.



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“I fear that he is angry with his children, and that the flames are his fiery war-clubs,” whispered the other. No sleep came to their eyes. All night long they watched and wondered, and waited in terror for the morning.

When morning came, the two hunters were still watching the sky. Little by little they saw that there was a high mountain in the west where the light had been, and above the mountain floated a dark blue smoke. “Come,” said one, “we will go and see what it is.”

They walked and walked till they came close to the mountain, and then they saw fire shining through the seams of the rocks. “It is a mountain of fire,” one whispered. “Shall we go on?” “We will,” said the other, and they went higher and higher up the mountain. At last they stood upon its highest point. “Now we know the secret,” they cried. “Our people will be glad when they hear this.”

Swiftly they went home through the forest to their own village. “We have found a wonder,” they cried. “We have found the home of the Fire Spirit. We know where she keeps her flames to help the Great Spirit and his children. It is a mountain of fire. Blue smoke rises above it night and day, for its heart is a fiery sea, and on the sea the red flames leap and dance. Come with us to the wonderful mountain of fire.”

The people of the village had been cold in the winter nights, and they cried, “O brothers, your words are good. We will move our lodges to the foot of the magic mountain. We can light our wigwam fires from

its flames, and we shall not fear that we shall perish in the long, cold nights of winter.”

So the Indians went to live at the foot of the fire-mountain, and when the cold nights came, they said, “We are not cold, for the Spirit of Fire is our good friend, and she keeps her people from perishing.”

PART II. THE FROLIC OF THE FLAMES

For many and many a moon the people of the village lived at the foot of the great fire-mountain. On summer evenings, the children watched the light, and when a child asked, “Father, what makes it?” the father said, “That is the home of the Great Spirit of Fire, who is our good friend.” Then all in the little village went to sleep and lay safely on their beds till the coming of the morning.

But one night when all the people in the village were asleep, the flames in the mountain had a great frolic. They danced upon the sea of fire as warriors dance the war-dance. They seized great rocks and threw them at the sky. The smoke above them hid the stars; the mountain throbbed and trembled. Higher and still higher sprang the dancing flames. At last, they leaped clear above the highest point of the mountain and started down it in a river of red fire. Then the gentle Spirit of Fire called, “Come back, my flames, come back again! The people in the village will not know that you are in a frolic, and they will be afraid.”

The flames did not heed her words, and the river

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of fire ran on and on, straight down the mountain. The flowers in its pathway perished. It leaped upon great trees and bore them to the earth. It drove the birds from their nests, and they fluttered about in the thick smoke. It hunted the wild creatures of the forest from the thickets where they hid, and they fled before it in terror.

At last, one of the warriors in the village awoke. The thick smoke was in his nostrils. In his ears was the war-cry of the flames. He sprang to the door of his lodge and saw the fiery river leaping down the mountain. "My people, my people," he cried, "the flames are upon

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us!” With cries of fear the people in the village fled far away into the forest, and the flames feasted upon the homes they loved.

The two hunters went to look upon the mountain, and when they came back, they said sadly, “There are no flowers on the mountain. Not a bird-song did we hear. Not a living creature did we see. It is all dark and gloomy. We know the fire is there, for the blue smoke still floats up to the sky, but the mountain will never again be our friend.”

PART III. THE BIRD OF FLAME

When the Great Spirit saw the work of the flames, he was very angry. “The fires of this mountain must perish,” he said. “No longer shall its red flames light the midnight sky.”

The mountain trembled with fear at the angry words of the Great Spirit. “O father of all fire and light,” cried the Fire Spirit, “I know that the flames have been cruel. They killed the beautiful flowers and drove your children from their homes, but for many, many moons they heeded my words and were good and gentle. They drove the frost and cold of winter from the wigwams of the village. The little children laughed to see their red light in the sky. The hearts of your people will be sad, if the flames must perish from the earth.”

The Great Spirit listened to the words of the gentle Spirit of Fire, but he answered, “The fires must perish. They have been cruel to my people, and the little children will fear them now; but because the children once loved

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them, the beautiful colors of the flames shall still live to make glad the hearts of all who look upon them.”

Then the Great Spirit struck the mountain with his magic war-club. The smoke above it faded away; its fires grew cold and dead. In its dark and gloomy heart only one little flame still trembled. It looked like a star. How beautiful it was!

The Great Spirit looked upon the little flame. He saw that it was beautiful and gentle, and he loved it. “The fires of the mountain must perish,” he said, “but you, little, gentle flame, shall have wings and fly far away from the cruel fires, and all my children will love you as I do.” Swiftly the little thing rose above the mountain and flew away in the sunshine. The light of the flames was still on its head; their marvelous colors were on its wings.

So from the mountain’s heart of fire sprang the first humming-bird. It is the bird of flame, for it has all the beauty of the colors of the flame, but it is gentle, and every child in all the earth loves it and is glad to see it fluttering over the flowers.



THE STORY OF THE FIRST BUTTERFLIES

THE Great Spirit thought, “By and by I will make men, but first I will make a home for them. It shall be very bright and beautiful. There shall be mountains and prairies and forests, and about it all shall be the blue waters of the sea.”

As the Great Spirit had thought, so he did. He gave the earth a soft cloak of green. He made the prairies beautiful with flowers. The forests were bright with birds of many colors, and the sea was the home of wonderful sea-creatures. “My children will love the prairies, the forests, and the seas,” he thought, “but the mountains look dark and cold. They are very dear to me, but how shall I make my children go to them and so learn to love them?”

Long the Great Spirit thought about the mountains. At last, he made many little shining stones. Some were red, some blue, some green, some yellow, and some were shining with all the lovely colors of the beautiful rainbow. “All my children will love what is beautiful,” he thought, “and if I hide the bright stones in the seams of the rocks of the mountains, men will come to find them, and they will learn to love my mountains.”

THE STORY OF THE FIRST BUTTERFLIES

When the stones were made and the Great Spirit looked upon their beauty, he said, "I will not hide you all away in the seams of the rocks. Some of you shall be out in the sunshine, so that the little children who cannot go to the mountains shall see your colors." Then the southwind came by, and as he went, he sang softly of forests flecked with light and shadow, of birds and their nests in the leafy trees. He sang of long summer days and the music of waters beating upon the shore. He sang of the moonlight and the starlight. All the wonders of the night, all the beauty of the morning, were in his song.

"Dear southwind," said the Great Spirit "here are some beautiful things for you to bear away with you to your summer home. You will love them, and all the little children will love them." At these words of the Great Spirit, all the stones before him stirred with life and lifted themselves on many-colored wings. They fluttered away in the sunshine, and the southwind sang to them as they went.



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So it was that the first butterflies came from a beautiful thought of the Great Spirit, and in their wings were all the colors of the shining stones that he did not wish to hide away.

THE STORY OF THE FIRST WOODPECKER

IN the days of long ago the Great Spirit came down from the sky and talked with men. Once as he went up and down the earth, he came to the wigwam of a woman. He went into the wigwam and sat down by the fire, but he looked like an old man, and the woman did not know who he was.

“I have fasted for many days,” said the Great Spirit to the woman. “Will you give me some food?” The woman made a very little cake and put it on the fire. “You can have this cake,” she said, “if you will wait for it to bake.” “I will wait,” he said.

When the cake was baked, the woman stood and looked at it. She thought, “It is very large. I thought it was small. I will not give him so large a cake as that.” So she put it away and made a small one. “If you will wait, I will give you this when it is baked,” she said, and the Great Spirit said, “I will wait.”

When that cake was baked, it was larger than the first one. “It is so large that I will keep it for a feast,” she thought. So she said to her guest, “I will not give you

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this cake, but if you will wait, I will make you another one.” “I will wait,” said the Great Spirit again.

Then the woman made another cake. It was still smaller than the others had been at first, but when she went to the fire for it, she found it the largest of all. She did not know that the Great Spirit’s magic had made each cake larger, and she thought, “This is a marvel, but I will not give away the largest cake of all.” So she said to her guest, “I have no food for you. Go to the forest and look there for your food. You can find it in the bark of the trees, if you will.”

The Great Spirit was angry when he heard the words of the woman. He rose up from where he sat and threw back his cloak. “A woman must be good and gentle,” he said, “and you are cruel. You shall no longer be a woman and live in a wigwam. You shall go out into the forest and hunt for your food in the bark of trees.”

The Great Spirit stamped his foot on the earth, and the woman grew smaller and smaller. Wings started from her body and feathers grew upon her. With a loud cry she rose from the earth and flew away to the forest.

And to this day all woodpeckers live in the forest and hunt for their food in the bark of trees.

WHY THE WOODPECKER'S HEAD IS RED

ONE day the woodpecker said to the Great Spirit, "Men do not like me. I wish they did."

The Great Spirit said, "If you wish men to love you, you must be good to them and help them. Then they will call you their friend."

"How can a little bird help a man?" asked the woodpecker.

"If one wishes to help, the day will come when he can help," said the Great Spirit. The day did come, and this story shows how a little bird helped a strong warrior.

There was once a cruel magician who lived in a gloomy wigwam beside the Black-Sea-Water. He did not like flowers, and they did not blossom in his pathway. He did not like birds, and they did not sing in the trees above him. The breath of his nostrils was fatal to all life. North, south, east, and west he blew the deadly fever that killed the women and the little children.

"Can I help them?" thought a brave warrior, and he said, "I will find the magician, and see if death will not come to him as he has made it come to others. I will go straightway to his home."

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For many days the brave warrior was in his canoe traveling across the Black-Sea-Water. At last he saw the gloomy wigwam of the cruel magician. He shot an arrow at the door and called, "Come out, O coward! You have killed women and children with your fatal breath, but you cannot kill a warrior. Come out and fight, if you are not afraid."

The cruel magician laughed loud and long. "One breath of fever," he said, "and you will fall to the earth." The warrior shot again, and then the magician was angry. He did not laugh, but he came straight out of his gloomy lodge, and as he came, he blew the fever all about him.

Then was seen the greatest fight that the sun had ever looked upon. The brave warrior shot his flint-tipped arrows, but the magician had on his magic cloak, and the arrows could not wound him. He blew from his nostrils the deadly breath of fever, but the heart of the warrior was so strong that the fever could not kill him.

At last the brave warrior had but three arrows in his quiver. "What shall I do?" he said sadly. "My arrows are good and my aim is good, but no arrow can go through the magic cloak."

"Come on, come on," called the magician. "You are the man who wished to fight. Come on." Then a woodpecker in a tree above the brave warrior said softly, "Aim your arrow at his head, O warrior! Do not shoot at his heart, but at the crest of feathers on his head. He can be wounded there, but not in his heart."

WHY THE WOODPECKER'S HEAD IS RED

The warrior was not so proud that he could not listen to a little bird. The magician bent to lift a stone, and an arrow flew from the warrior's bow. It buzzed and stung like a wasp. It came so close to the crest of feathers that the magician trembled with terror. Before he could run, another arrow came, and this one struck him right on his crest. His heart grew cold with fear. "Death has struck me," he cried.

"Your cruel life is over," said the warrior. "People shall no longer fear your fatal breath." Then he said to the woodpecker, "Little bird, you have been a good friend to me, and I will do all that I can for you." He put some of the red blood of the magician upon the little creature's head. It made the crest of feathers there as red as flame. "Whenever a man looks upon you," said the warrior, "he will say, 'That bird is our friend. He helped to kill the cruel magician.'"



The little woodpecker was very proud of his red crest because it showed that he was the friend of man, and all his children to this day are as proud as he was.

WHY THE CAT ALWAYS FALLS UPON HER FEET

SOME magicians are cruel, but others are gentle and good to all the creatures of the earth. One of these good magicians was one day traveling in a great forest. The sun rose high in the heavens, and he lay down at the foot of a tree. Soft, green moss grew all about him. The sun shining through the leaves made flecks of light and shadow upon the earth. He heard the song of the bird and the lazy buzz of the wasp. The wind rustled the leafy boughs above him. All the music of the forest lulled him to slumber, and he closed his eyes.

As the magician lay asleep, a great serpent came softly from the thicket. It lifted high its shining crest and saw the man at the foot of the tree. "I will kill him!" it hissed. "I could have eaten that cat last night if he had not called, 'Watch, little cat, watch!' I will kill him, I will kill him!"

Closer and closer the deadly serpent moved. The magician stirred in his sleep. "Watch, little cat, watch!" he said softly. The serpent drew back, but the magician's eyes were shut, and it went closer. It hissed its war-cry. The sleeping magician did not move. The serpent was upon him—no, far up in the high branches of the tree



SHE LEAPED DOWN UPON THE SERPENT

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above his head the little cat lay hidden. She had seen the serpent when it came from the thicket. She watched it as it went closer and closer to the sleeping man, and she heard it hiss its war-cry. The little cat's body quivered with anger and with fear, for she was so little and the serpent was so big. "The magician was very good to me," she thought, and she leaped down upon the serpent.

Oh, how angry the serpent was! It hissed, and the flames shot from its eyes. It struck wildly at the brave little cat, but now the cat had no fear. Again and again she leaped upon the serpent's head, and at last the creature lay dead beside the sleeping man whom it had wished to kill.

When the magician awoke, the little cat lay on the earth, and not far away was the dead serpent. He knew at once what the cat had done, and he said, "Little cat, what can I do to show you honor for your brave fight? Your eyes are quick to see, and your ears are quick to hear. You can run very swiftly. I know what I can do for you. You shall be known over the earth as the friend of man, and you shall always have a home in the home of man. And one thing more, little cat: you leaped from the high tree to kill the deadly serpent, and now as long as you live, you shall leap where you will, and you shall always fall upon your feet."

WHY THE SWALLOW'S TAIL IS FORKED

THIS is the story of how the swallow's tail came to be forked.

One day the Great Spirit asked all the animals that he had made to come to his lodge. Those that could fly came first: the robin, the bluebird, the owl, the butterfly, the wasp, and the firefly. Behind them came the chicken, fluttering its wings and trying hard to keep up. Then came the deer, the squirrel, the serpent, the cat, and the rabbit. Last of all came the bear, the beaver, and the hedgehog. Every one traveled as swiftly as he could, for each wished to hear the words of the Great Spirit.

"I have called you together," said the Great Spirit, "because I often hear you scold and fret. What do you wish me to do for you? How can I help you?"

"I do not like to hunt so long for my food," said the bear.

"I do not like to build nests," said the bluebird.

"I do not like to live in the water," said the beaver.

"And I do not like to live in a tree," said the squirrel.

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At last man stood erect before the Great Spirit and said, "O Great Father, the serpent feasts upon my blood. Will you not give him some other food?"

"And why?" asked the Great Spirit.

"Because I am the first of all the creatures you have made," answered man proudly.

Then every animal in the lodge was angry to hear the words of man. The squirrel chattered, the wasp buzzed, the owl hooted, and the serpent hissed.

"Hush, be still," said the Great Spirit. "You are, O man, the first of my creatures, but I am the father of all. Each one has his rights, and the serpent must have his food. Mosquito, you are a great traveler. Now fly away and find what creature's blood is best for the serpent. Do you all come back in a year and a day."

The animals straightway went to their homes. Some went to the river, some to the forest, and some to the prairie, to wait for the day when they must meet at the lodge of the Great Spirit.

The mosquito traveled over the earth and stung every creature that he met to find whose blood was the best for the serpent. On his way back to the lodge of the Great Spirit he looked up into the sky, and there was the swallow.

"Good-day, swallow," called the mosquito.

"I am glad to see you, my friend," sang the swallow. "Are you going to the lodge of the Great Spirit? And have you found out whose blood is best for the serpent?"

WHY THE SWALLOW'S TAIL IS FORKED

"The blood of man," answered the mosquito.

The mosquito did not like man, but the swallow had always been his friend. "What can I do to help man?" he thought. "Oh, I know what I can do." Then he asked the mosquito, "Whose blood did you say?"

"Man's blood," said the mosquito; "that is best."

"*This* is best," said the swallow, and he tore out the mosquito's tongue.

The mosquito buzzed angrily and went quickly to the Great Spirit.

"All the animals are here," said the Great Spirit. "They are waiting to hear whose blood is best for the serpent."

The mosquito tried to answer, "The blood of man," but he could not say a word. He could make no sound but "Kss-ksss-ksssss!"

"What do you say?"

"Kss-ksss-ksssss!" buzzed the mosquito angrily.

All the creatures wondered. Then said the swallow:—

"Great Father, the mosquito is timid and cannot answer you. I met him before we came, and he told me whose blood it was."

"Then let us know at once," said the Great Spirit.

"It is the blood of the frog," answered the swallow quickly. "Is it not so, friend mosquito?"

"Kss-ksss-ksssss!" hissed the angry mosquito.

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“The serpent shall have the frog’s blood,” said the Great Spirit. “Man shall be his food no longer.”

Now the serpent was angry with the swallow, for he did not like frog’s blood. As the swallow flew near him, he seized him by the tail and tore away a little of it. This is why the swallow’s tail is forked, and it is why man always looks upon the swallow as his friend.

