

How Ducks Got Their Fine Feathers

Blackfoot

"It was in the fall when leaves are yellow that it happened, and long, long ago. The Duck-people had gathered to go away, just as they are doing now. The buck-deer was coming down from the high ridges to visit friends in the lowlands along the streams as they have always done.

On a lake Old-man saw the Duck-people getting ready to go away, and at that time they all looked alike; that is, they all wore the same colored clothes. The loons and the geese and the ducks were there and playing in the sunlight. The loons were laughing loudly and the diving was fast and merry to see.

On the hill where Old-man stood there was a great deal of moss, and he began to tear it from the ground and roll it into a great ball. When he had gathered all he needed he shouldered the load and started for the shore of the lake, staggering under the weight of the great burden. Finally the Duck-people saw him coming with his load of moss and began to swim away from the shore.

"Wait, my brothers!" he called, 'I have a big load here, and I am going to give you people a dance. Come and help me get things ready. '

"Don't you do it,' said the gray goose to the others; 'that's Old-man and he is up to something bad, I am sure.'

"So the loon called to Old-man and said they wouldn't help him at all.

"Right near the water Old-man dropped his ball of moss and then cut twenty long poles. With the poles he built a lodge which he covered with the moss, leaving a doorway facing the lake. Inside the lodge he built a fire and when it grew bright he cried:

"Say, brothers, why should you treat me this way when I am here to give you a big dance? Come into the lodge," but they wouldn't do that.

Finally Old-man began to sing a song in the duck-talk, and keep time with his drum. The Duck-people liked the music, and swam a little nearer to the shore, watching for trouble all the time, but Old-man sang so sweetly that pretty soon they waddled up to the lodge and went inside.

The loon stopped near the door, for he believed that what the gray goose had said was true, and that Old-man was up to some mischief. The gray goose, too, was careful to stay close to the door but the ducks reached all about the fire. Politely, Old-man passed the pipe, and they all smoked with him because it is wrong not to smoke in a person's lodge if the pipe is offered, and the Duck-people knew that.

"Well,' said Old-man, 'this is going to be the Blind-dance, but you will have to be painted first.

"Brother Mallard, name the colors -- tell how you want me to paint you.'

"Well,' replied the mallard drake, 'paint my head green, and put a white circle around my throat, like a necklace. Besides that, I want a brown breast and yellow legs: but I don't want my wife painted that way.'

"Old-man painted him just as he asked, and his wife, too. Then the teal and the wood-duck (it took a long time to paint the wood-duck) and the spoonbill and the blue-bill and the canvasback and the goose and the brant and the loon -- all chose their paint. Old-man painted them all just as they wanted him to, and kept singing all the time. They looked very pretty in the firelight, for it was night before the painting was done.

"Now,' said Old-man, 'as this is the Blind-dance, when I beat upon my drum you must all shut your eyes tight and circle around the fire as I sing. Every one that peeks will have sore eyes forever.'

"Then the Duck-people shut their eyes and Old-man began to sing: 'Now you come, ducks, now you come -- tum-tum, tum; tum-tum, tum.'

"Around the fire they came with their eyes still shut, and as fast as they reached Old-man, the rascal would seize them, and wring their necks. Ho! things were going fine for Old-man, but the loon peeked a little, and saw what was going on; several others heard the fluttering and opened their eyes, too. The loon cried out, 'He's killing us -- let us fly,' and they did that. There was a great squawking and quacking and fluttering as the Duck-people escaped from the lodge. Ho! but Old-man was angry, and he kicked the back of the loon-duck, and that is why his feet turn from his body when he walks or tries to stand. Yes, that is why he is a cripple to-day.

"And all of the Duck-people that peeked that night at the dance still have sore eyes -- just as Old-man told them they would have. Of course they hurt and smart no more but they stay red to pay for peeking, and always will. You have seen the mallard and the rest of the Duck-people. You can see that the colors Old-man painted so long ago are still bright and handsome, and they will stay that way forever and forever.