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The Indian Legend of the Trailing Arbutus

Emilie Poulsson

On the south shore of Lake Superior, near the Pictured Rock, grows to perfection the dearest and sweetest of all wild flowers: the arbutus, the plant that the most skillful florist, the plant that the tender, loving touch of woman, even, cannot cause to grow in hothouse or garden.

From time to time, while sitting by the campfires in the evening, I have been told of the creation of many animals and birds by the great Mannaboosho and his captains the Manitos. And this is the legend as told me of the origin or creation of the arbutus:

It was many, many moons ago there lived an old man alone in his lodge, beside a frozen stream in the forest; his locks and beard were long and white with age. He was heavily clad in fine furs, for all the world was winter—snow and ice everywhere. The winds went wild through the forests, searching every bush and tree for birds to chill, chasing evil spirits over hills, and the old man went about searching in deep snow for pieces of wood to keep up the fire in his lodge. In despair he returned to his lodge, and sitting down by the last few dying coals, he cried to Mannaboosho that he might not perish. And the winds blew aside the door of the lodge and there came in a most beautiful maiden. Her cheeks were red and made of wild roses; her eyes were large and glowed like the eyes of fawns at night; her hair was long and black as the raven's, and it touched the ground as she walked; her hands were covered with willow buds; her bonnet was a wreath of wild flowers, and her clothing of sweet grasses and ferns, and her moccasins were white lilies, and when she breathed the air of the lodge it became warm.

The old man said: "My daughter, I am glad to see you; my lodge is cold and cheerless, but it will shield you from the night. Do tell me who you are, that you dare to come to my lodge in such strange clothing? Come, sit here and tell me of your country and victories, and I will tell you of my exploits, for I am Manito."



He then filled two pipes with tobacco, that they might smoke as they talked, and

when the smoke had warmed the old man's tongue he said: "I am Manito. I blow my breath, and the waters of the river stand still." The maiden said: "I breathe, and flowers spring up on all the plains." The old man said: "I shake my locks, and snow covers all the ground." "I shake my curls," said the maiden, "and warm rains fall from the clouds." The old man said: "When I walk around, the leaves fall from the trees; at my command the animals hide in their holes in the ground, and the birds get up out of the water and fly away." The maiden said: "When I walk around, the plants lift up their heads, the trees cover their nakedness with many leaves, the birds come back, and all who see me sing. Music is everywhere."

And so they talked, and the air became warm in the lodge. The old man's head dropped upon his breast, and he slept. Then the sun came back, and a bluebird came to the top of the lodge and called: "Say-ee, say-ee, I am thirsty;" and the river called back: "I am free; come and drink."

As the old man slept, the maiden passed her hands above his head, and he began to grow small; streams of water ran out of his mouth, and soon he was a small mass upon the ground, and his clothing turned to green leaves. Then the maiden, kneeling upon the ground, took from her bosom the most precious white flowers and hid them all around under the leaves. She breathed on them and said: "I give you all my virtues and my sweetest breath, and all who would pick you shall do so on bended knee."

Then the girl moved away through the woods and over the plains, and all the birds sang to her. Wherever she stepped, and nowhere else, grows the arbutus.

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