

THE BIRTH OF THE SPRING FLOWERS

(Lenape)

After Spring, Summer and Autumn had come to the Earth, the Animals were very happy. They lived in sunny ease through most of the year, and the short interval of cold and snow was regarded as a pleasant contrast to what would later appear. The animals were satisfied to remain close to their shelters, in anticipation of the greater joys to come.

There was but one voice of discontent concerning the arrangement. Until Fisher and Wolverine had succeeded in letting out the Seasons from the Sky Land, Old Winter Wind had been dominant - had full sway over the Land from one end to the other of the recurring years. There had been no one to gainsay him; he could do as he pleased, cause as much discomfort as his imagination could conjure up for the earth creatures.

Now, he had strong rivals. His rule endured for only a short span; he was no longer master of the winds, and he became very angry.

One day when he was writhing in a tempest of bad humor, Nanapush came by. "What is the trouble, Winter Wind? Why are you so annoyed?" Winter Wind was a little hesitant about telling Nanapush his grievance, but with some maneuvering, Nanapush finally got the story. "Well, really, Winter Wind, I am ashamed of you. You are very unreasonable. Why should you be master all of the time? Why not give some one else a chance now and then?" But Winter Wind, now that he had begun to voice his supposed wrongs, was not to be put off. Finally Nanapush said, "Well I see nothing for it but a contest. You claim to be stronger and more powerful than Summer Breeze or Spring Zephyr. I shall see that you soon have a chance to prove your superiority." And with that, Nanapush was gone.

Winter Wind did not know just what Nanapush had meant, but before long, he had an opportunity to find out. He was one day sitting in his tepee on the high peak. Snow covered every bush and tree, the lakes were frozen over. Not a bird or beast was to be seen anywhere. The furs, which lay on the floor of his tepee and hung from the walls, could not keep the chill of the mountain crags from entering.

For three moons, Winter Wind had worked. He had hardly slept during that time, and he was looking old and worn now. But still, in sheer stubbornness he gasped forth the icy blasts. All at once, between two breaths of blustery wind he felt a presence. He turned, and here in the doorway of the tepee stood, smiling and strong, the Spirit of Spring Zephyr.

She was a beautiful maiden with soft and shining eyes, like those of a young gazelle. She was dressed in pale green leaves of the maple, and her hair, black as a raven's wing, hung like a cloak of gleaming light. The sight of this Maiden, glowing with health and vigor, enraged Winter Wind beyond all else. "What do you want here?" he demanded. "I am the strongest force on earth, and I can wither you into nothingness by the power of my cold. The Maiden laughed gently and replied, "Poor old Winter Wind! I am sorry for you. There is no warmth of love in you. You are destroying yourself with your own tempestuous anger."

"No such thing!" returned the old one. "This earth belonged to me until you came. The birds and beasts knew nothing else - and they are still my subjects, and will do as I say." "It may be so," rejoined the Young Visitor. "You are very strong." "Yes I am! When I call the beasts tremble. When I blow upon the earth, the gales arise, the tempests roar, the whirlwinds spin. What can you do to compare with that?"

"Nothing, Grandfather! Nothing! When I call there is no sound but a gentle murmuring. The tree twigs whisper, the waters ripple, the grass shimmers, the warm rain falls." "That is weakness! There is no power in such manifestations. When I shake my hair, there is the roar of the writhing snow storm, the wild ear-splitting torrent of the Mountains - such is the might of the Spirit of Winter. "You are right, Grandfather! I have no such greatness. When I shake my hair, only the birds give answer, the soft breezes blow, the rivers and rills are glad. The whole earth sings in tune with the tinkle of the spring bells."

While they were talking, Winter Wind had forgotten to blow. He had sunk to the floor of the tepee in sheer weakness of physical force. The gentle winds were gliding over the land, the snow was melting, the ice fast disappearing from the lake. The voice of Spring was so sweet and comforting that gradually the white head of Old Man Winter sank forward on his breast. He ceased to speak, and soon he lay relaxed and quiet on the soft fur of the floor. The sun was shining low, and the tepee felt warm and cozy.

With tenderness and pity, Spring waved her hands over the prostrate form. A mist appeared, and in the dimness, the skin mantle, which covered the body of the old man, was changed into soft furry leaves. She blew her fragrant breath around the tepee, and when she looked again, Winter had disappeared. The drip of the melting icicles was music in the air; there was a spicy odor all about. A bird was caroling in the treetop; a tiny chipmunk scampered into the teepee, then was gone again. Spring smiled a blessing over the soft, furry floor. The tepee, like the snow about, melted away, and here peeping up among the leaves were tiny pink and white blossoms - the first flowers of the Arbutus which ever since has heralded the Springtime - returned to fill the hearts of all with hope, joy, and gladness.

The Ways of the Elders Through Folklore: An Anthology of Native American Indian Stories. by Doris Riverbird.

