

Samaroona - 'Sage of Tigara' - Master Storyteller

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I had been doing my chores at the school, chopping kindling and carrying coal into coal bins. I was on the way home to Uncle Nayukuk's and Aunt Mumangeena's sod igloo when I noticed Samaroona coming home from the southwest of the village.

A wave of happiness came to me as I watched him. He was dragging a yellowish white object and I knew what it was at once. Samaroona had caught a large polar bear.

One could not mistake Samaroona for someone else. He had a permanent limp. I went to meet him on the run and when I got to him, he said, smiling, "My little boy, you needn't have come to help me. You might not know it but I'm quite strong. Alright now, you may help if you wish and for that, I'll tell you a new legend tonight."

And so he would. No man knew more legends than he did, and no one had more skill in telling them.

Joined By Tragedy

Samaroona and I had become close through a tragedy that saddened both of us. He had a little grandson named Roger Bolt. When Roger and I were very little boys, we had become fast friends and were almost inseparable. We were the same age and we looked somewhat alike according to people who had seen us together. We played together constantly. We visited each other's igloo. I ate with his family and he ate with mine.

When we were eight years old, Roger became ill with pneumonia and two days later he passed away. I was saddened and I missed him greatly. Samaroona was deeply grieved because he had loved his grandson.

The dotting grandfather did everything for his grandson. Beside giving tender attention to Roger, he made him toy boats, bows and arrows, and little sleds. All this ceased, of course, after Roger's death. This apparently disturbed Samaroona.

Invitations

Samaroona began to invite me frequently to his igloo to eat with him and his wife. It gave them some measure of comfort

because Roger and I had been very close.

Before he died, Roger used to invite me to his grandparents home and Samaroona would tell us stories in the evenings. This also stopped for some weeks after the boy died.

One evening, after we had our meal, Samaroona said, "Since your little friend died, I have not told a story. I know how little boys like to listen to them. I did when I was a youngster and I wanted to listen to more and more of them. You're no different than any other little boy. How would you like it if I told you a legend tonight?"

I was overjoyed with Samaroona's suggestion and I told him I would enjoy it. He smiled.

Samaroona was an average-sized man. He was a man of the old school — a man who held on grimly to the old established customs. At that time he was the only male in the village to cut his hair in the old way and that was to cut the crown of his head short leaving a fringe of longer hair around his head.

Kindly, Benign Man

He had strong features that looked as if he could be a stern man, but, to my knowledge, he never exercised any meanness. He didn't need to because his word was listened to and respected. He had great knowledge of the country he lived in.

His eyes were the most benign I have ever seen. They reflected his great kindness and serenity of spirit. He was the kind of a man one respected at once because he had great dignity.

To be around him was a comfort, which, at the same time, gave one a feeling that Samaroona was superior in every way without any effort on his part to exert it.

To listen to him tell a legend was an experience in itself. He was a colorful story teller. He made every intonation of his voice count as he spun a tale with great vividness, until one could almost see the story characters and actions. He used his hands and arms dramatically to emphasize dramatic moments.

Fearful Legends

Many of the legends were fearful and his great skill in telling them made them more so.

When he told one of those, I would sit transfixed by his side and shiver with fear. I tried very hard not to let Samaroona's long, low hallway of his sod igloo to intimidate me further. But, nevertheless, it was there and I dreaded going through it. It became a formidable obstacle which was impossible to avoid especially after the great storyteller told a fearsome tale.

I was nine years old at the time. Many an evening, I was thankful that Uncle Nayukuk's and Aunt Mumangeena's igloo was next door to Samaroona's. The proximity of the houses didn't help matters very much though because, on the way home, I had to go through Samaroona's long, low hallway that had little storage rooms on each side of it.

It was always dark in there. As I hurried out through it, I could feel my skin crawling with goose bumps. I was sure that a wicked man, a monster, or an ogre, was going to reach for me from one of the little rooms.

I had to go through the same ordeal because Uncle Nayukuk's igloo also had a long hallway with little chambers on each side of it.

Crashing Entrance

One evening, after listening to one of Samaroona's especially scary legends I rushed through our hallway and opened the little door very quickly. At that moment a crosspiece at the bottom of the door against which it rested when shut, caught my right toe and I tripped, sprawling face down on the floor making a crashing noise.

Aunt Mumangeena and Uncle Nayukuk had been eating a snack of muktuk when I made the crashing entrance. Mumangeena screamed, her eyes wide with fright. She fell on her side with a sudden motion and her ulu (women's knife) flew and crashed to the back of the room!

My entrance didn't seem to bother Uncle Nayukuk. He just looked mildly surprised and kept on chewing the muktuk in his mouth.

Mumangeena and Nayukuk looked at me for several moments as I lay sprawled on the floor. I looked back at them and smiled sheepishly.

Aunt Mumangeena always

called me "mother" because I was named after her mother.

"Why mother, has someone been chasing you?" she asked. "No, I just tripped." I answered uncomfortably.

"I've never seen anyone enter with such suddenness," she said, "I still think someone was chasing you."

I got up feeling somewhat shameful and took my parka off. Aunt Mumangeena offered me some muktuk and I ate with them feeling safe and little more comfortable.

Seven-Evening Legend

One evening, Samaroona started a legend that apparently had something to do with Aleutian Islands. Before he was through, the story lasted for seven evenings.

The synopsis of the legend is as follows:

A great chief of Tigara sent his eldest son on a dangerous two-year mission in search of a treasure of beads to a country of islands. He set out on the long journey in a kayak. He encountered great many perils along the way and back.

He was attacked repeatedly by hostile people. He also encountered friendly people who were great duck hunters by using spears. (Apparently Hooper Bay people.)

After a year's journey, he finally arrived at the great rocky islands. He encountered people there who used kayaks with two men in them. (Probably Aleuts in bidarkas.) The people were hostile and they chased him with their two-man kayaks but the young man was strong and he easily out-distanced them and because his kayak had good lines.

The chief had told his son that the treasure of beads were hidden in a sea cave on a ledge high above the level of the sea. It would be identified by a string of dried seaweed hanging down from it.

He looked for days and finally located a huge sea cave. He paddled slowly into it and all of sudden, great splashes of water erupted all around him. They were caused by fierce looking and ugly animals that jumped and dived into the water. They had long tails, big eyes, and long mustaches, something like the walrus but longer.

(Samaroona was apparently describing the sea otter of the Aleutian Islands.)

The young man found that he had startled the animals and they had dived from fright. They soon got accustomed to him and swam around him without trying to do any harm. Some floated on their back and watched him. He soon found them to be very friendly and tame. In fact, when he left the islands, he was reluctant to leave the gentle animals.

The young man paddled around slowly and quietly looking all around the cave. He saw daylight through a small hole in the rock wall and he paddled to it and went through. He had to duck his head because there were gentle swells running into the cave that lifted his kayak.

When he entered, he found that it was a twin cave as large as the one he was in. He saw a seaweed string at once and paddled his kayak under it. He got out of his kayak and fastened it with a sealskin line to a crack in a rock by wedging the line into it.

He took a bag made from the bladder of an oogruk (bearded seal) and climbed up to the ledge. He looked into a hollow and there they were — a treasure of beads colorful, shiny, and beautiful!

He filled the bladder bag full with beads and climbed down to his kayak and paddled out of the sea cave. He went to a small beach in a cove and pulled his kayak out of the water to rest a while before heading back on his long journey back to Tigara.

The rest stop almost proved fatal for the young man. After resting briefly, he heard a commotion from sea gulls that abound in great numbers in the area. He thought he heard a human voice and he was right. To his right about a hundred yards appeared a kayak manned by two men. They saw him at once and shouted in a language he could not understand.

The young man jumped up and pushed his kayak into the water at great speed. He got into it and started to paddle out at once. He looked back for an instant and saw that there were about fifteen kayaks rushing for him.

Before he could get up enough speed his pursuers closed in on him to about 25 yards. The ones in front began to throw spears at the young man. One of the spears landed inches to his right.

The young man paddled with all his might and began to pull slowly away from his pursuers. He paddled straight out to sea and escaped. The islanders pursued him for a long period. They finally gave up the chase and headed back to the islands far in the distance.

The young man turned his kayak parallel to the land to his right and paddled strongly. He wanted to get as much distance away from the people that chased him before he camped for the night.

The Chief's son's journey back to Tigara was even more perilous. Once he rode out a great storm for three days. This would have been fatal for anyone else. His great skill with the kayak saved him.

When he finally returned to Tigara with the treasure of beads, a great celebration was staged in his honor. The young man recounted his exploits to a great audience.

Such were the kind of legends Samaroona told in great detail. It did not make a difference whether the audience was composed of little boys or a roomful

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of adults. His ability to bring out pathos, strength, wickedness, ferocity, eeriness, kindness, and beauty, was amazing. He was indeed a master story teller.

Revered for Another

Although greatly revered for his story telling ability, Samaroona was also revered for another reason. He was one of the greatest hunters the village had ever known. His limp apparently did not handicap him too much in his younger days, but it was revealed when he grew old that he had endured great pain all through his hunting life.

He was an inspiration to many a young hunter. Even under the handicap, Samaroona's endurance was tremendous. His ability to take seals, oogrük, walrus, foxes, wolverines, wolves polar bears, and the great bow-head whales stood out among his fellow hunters.

Treasured Memories

The memory of Samaroona has been a comfort through the years. To have known him has been a privilege and an honor. As far as this writer is concerned, he was a great man. The toys, bows and arrows, legends, and many, many, kindnesses Samaroona had shown him are treasured memories.

His serenity was a steadying force in his village. He was a great link to the past through his fabulous knowledge of legends. His selflessness and generosity was a boon. His contribution to the village's existence and well-being was tremendous.

There shall always be an unforgettable picture of Samaroona in this writer's mind as he walked home dragging a large polar bear skin he had taken that day — his sounding rod favoring the leg that limped.

He was a great example of a man whose will and stamina stood unchallenged by men who possessed full physical equipment — for Samaroona had been born with a club foot.