

## **How Kos-Ko-Menos, The Kingfisher, Won His Belt**

by Jean Thompson

Heaps of strange events in Nature go unexplained. Some say 'tis because the wonderful old Indian story tellers who knew many wood secrets are gone. Long ago the little Indian children loved to squat beside some smouldering lodge fire and listen to these tales—these hidden secrets told of their little brothers of the wood. They were told how Moo-wee-suk, the racoon, always wore five rings about his plummy tail, why the red-winged blackbird is branded with two spots of living fire on its jetty wings, why the woodpecker carries a bright splash of fresh blood upon his crest, and also why the badger is always a kind of joke, just because of his war-paint markings. Some tales remain untold and one of them is how Kos-ko-menos, the great kingfisher, won his beautiful blue belt.

Dee-dee-askh, the blue jay, had wintered in the deep pine forests instead of flying south one autumn. Wild berries had been plentiful that year and the greedy jay hated to leave behind such good feasting, so he remained behind the migrating birds. He was glad though when the long, cold months of "The Snow Shoes" passed, for he was tired of feeding upon pine-cone seeds, or anything which he could pick up in the forest. The snow had begun to melt away from the south sides of the hills and the mountain brooks roared tremendously, breaking free from their strong ice prisons, making pleasant music through the valleys and in the rocky passes of the mountains.

The crows were colonising, coming out from their retreats in the thick pine coverts, where they had huddled all winter to keep from freezing. They cawed hoarsely to each other. The jay screamed loudly, trying to drown their cries and break up their council. Dee-dee-askh is not popular with the wood people, for he has always had the bad reputation of being a thief. He loves to watch smaller birds at their nest building and rob them of their eggs or the very young birds; no wonder he is unpopular.

Dee-dee-askh filled the woods with his harsh, strident screams and swooped down the valley, following Otter Creek until he reached a spot where it broadens. One side is a steep bank, and across towers the mountain, green with thick spruces to its summit. This forest was where the jay and his mate decided to build their nest. Year after year they had built there and Dee-dee-askh had managed to rid himself of very near neighbours, fighting them savagely if they intruded upon his privacy, so remained a sort of monarch. He loved to conceal himself in some thick bush and frighten more timid birds, or little furry things.

"Kee-oo, Kee-oo," would scream the jay, imitating to perfection the harsh scream of a hawk; then how he would chuckle to himself to see the frightened things scurry, or fly off to hide themselves in the thick woods.

One day Kos-ko-menos himself, King of all the kingfisher tribes, came journeying down the creek; he was looking for a new building site, for, as it happened, the old fishing pool where he had lived the season before was too shallow, owing to the drought. So the fish had all gone up-stream seeking deeper pools. It was important that the kingfisher should build near good fishing, because soon there would be young birds to feed.

Taking six little flapping short flights, then a glide, on came Kos-ko-menos, followed closely by his smaller mate. His beautiful crimson eyes searched up and down the creek as he flew, trying to decide upon the best building site. But when he came to the clay bank, he knew he need search no

further; nothing could be better. Without even waiting to rest themselves, Kos-ko-menos and his mate soon began to make the dirt fly in all directions as they excavated deeply for their new home. Round and smooth was their doorway, just large enough to admit one kingfisher at a time. About half-way up the side of the bank it was placed, and ran fully six feet, straight into the clay. Into a little hollow at the very end they threw a few fish bones and loose leaves, then the beautiful eggs were laid, which in time would become three goggle-eyed, frowsy-headed little kingfishers, very ugly, but handsome to their parents, of course.

Kos-ko-menos darted back and forth, flashing like a great blue jewel, as he took up his sentinel-like position upon a stake in the water, where he could peer straight down into the deep water for fish. He preened his feathers, shaking out the clinging clay, and gave loud screams, he felt so happy about the nest.

"Kerrr-ik-r-r-r," he screamed triumphantly, making a terrific sound, just exactly like that of a harsh, wooden toy rattle, only louder, if possible. The very mountains rang with his cry. Then all the furry tribes knew for certain that Kos-ko-menos had come to live in that spot. Many of them disliked the idea very much; they dreaded his harsh scream which made the more timid jump and disturbed their babies, it was such a horrid cry. The kingfisher has always been considered a kind of outcast among other birds. They imagine that he is uncanny; that is, because of his wonderful skill at fishing, and because he can dart into the water quickly and stay under a long time, so they think perhaps he is himself more of a fish than a bird. They cannot understand why he does not walk properly, but has a way of waddling which is very funny because his legs are very short and placed far back upon his body. His great bushy crest makes him appear almost top-heavy and his appearance is ungainly. I think, however, that the real reason why he is shunned by some birds and shabbily treated, is because they are, secretly in their hearts, jealous of the beautiful feathers which Kos-ko-menos wears, because, no matter how homely his body may be, it is beautifully clothed. Upon the top of his head he wears a long, high crest of rich, dark green, which colour extends down his neck, and each little feather is flecked with spots of blue of a wonderful hue. Violet and blue is his coat, his tail a deep indigo blue. Over each crimson eye and just beneath it, is a cunning dot of black. He wears a thick, feathered waistcoat of yellowish-white, and his beak is jet black.

Once more Kos-ko-menos screamed his wooden-rattle cry. Then like a flash he darted straight into the deepest part of the pool, and before the spray had fallen he was out again with a fine, wriggling fish. As he was about to kill the fish upon a near-by stone, a blue, flashing fury came dashing out of the woods with a harsh, angry scream, and Dee-dee-askh landed upon the crest of the kingfisher. They had a terrific battle; back and forth, back and forth over the creek they flew, showers of light blue feathers barred with black and white fell, and a few speckled green ones. Mrs. Kingfisher poked her head curiously forth from the bank to see what all the screaming meant. At last the jay flew back to the woods with a portion of his proud crest gone, and the kingfisher, smoothing down his ruffled feathers, gave another scream and went back to his fishing. 'Tis said that certain of the wood creatures who witnessed the conquering of the jay chuckled and grunted with joy, remembering sundry robberies of nests and burrows by Dee-dee-askh, the cruel one. After this they began to have a little more regard for Kos-ko-menos, the kingfisher; but this was just the *beginning* of things.

Musquash, the muskrat, lived under the bank of the creek. Many of the little muskrats used to stray out upon the bank right in plain sight of an old pirate eagle which lived on the mountain, and which used to come sailing down the creek, watching to swoop down upon anything alive which he saw below.

Musquash himself was old and almost blind; he could not detect the eagle when he soared high above. One after another the young ones were stolen by the old pirate, old Bald Head. This had happened *before* the kingfisher came to live in the bank. One day Musquash himself ventured up the bank after roots; he did not see old Bald Head high above, watching him.

But Kos-ko-menos sat upon his sentinel post watching. He thought he saw a faint white dot in the sky—the flashing of the sun upon the bald head of the old pirate.

"Khr-r-r-rrr," screamed the kingfisher defiantly, as the old pirate was hovering his wings, making ready to drop down upon poor, old blind Musquash. Before he reached earth, Musquash, heeding the warning scream of Kos-ko-menos, was paddling straight for his hut under water.

The kingfisher was glad to see the old sky pirate outwitted, and so glad to save Musquash, that he dived down after the fish he had been watching, caught it, and all the time he was eating the fish he kept up a little glad, chattering chuckle, deep down inside. Many had seen how the kingfisher had saved old Musquash, and finally they all came to depend upon him to warn them when danger came that way. Kos-ko-menos never failed them.

The jay family raised three young, impudent jays. Already the young ones in the kingfishers' nest had stuck their fuzzy heads out of the hole in the bank, and both Dee-dee-askh and Kos-ko-menos had all they could do to get food enough for their families. One day the jay caught a fine catfish, and he thought to himself that he might as well gobble it all up instead of taking it home. He flew quickly to a near-by stone to beat the catfish, lest it sting him with its sharp horn. As he was about to swallow the fish whole, he heard an angry scream from his home. His mate had been watching him all the time. Again came the cry, which sounded not unlike the sharp striking of metal, then a loud, shrill scream, "Cray-cray, cray!" Dee-dee-askh saw a whirl of light blue feathers approaching. In his haste to bolt the fish whole, lest his mate take it from him, he choked and choked and swallowed. But alas, greedy fellow! The fish was too large for just one mouthful, and he began to flutter helplessly upon the rock, while the tail of the catfish protruded from his mouth.

Kos-ko-menos saw it all and chuckled to himself, but he had a kind heart. Flying straight to the jay, he gave one sharp, strong tug at the tail of the catfish, and the greedy jay was saved. Some say the *real* reason the kingfisher seized the catfish was because he wished to gobble it down himself—but that point is not certain. Kos-ko-menos had certainly saved his neighbour from choking to death, which showed he bore no grudge against the jay. Of course all the wood people saw the kind act of Kos-ko-menos, and it made a deep impression upon them; they marvelled, because the jay had been so rude to the kingfisher. It was nice of him to forget his mean treatment, they thought.

Down deep in a certain pool of the creek lived old Kenozha, the pickerel, dreaded and feared for years by all the inhabitants of the banks who swam in the water, or fished for a living. The sly old fellow had a cruel way of coming up just beneath them when they were in the water, and before they knew it he had nipped off a toe, a tail, or even a head. The turtles had lost claws, the giant bullfrog, leader of the spring choruses, was minus a foot, and even the wary old loon had lost a toe. Kos-ko-menos, who knew all about the old pickerel and his crafty ways, determined to rid the pool of him, and took to watching for him, as many another had before him; the jay, the loon, and the hawks had all fished for Kenozha, but this is why they had failed: the old fellow had seen their *shadows* upon the water. So wise Kos-ko-menos, the kingfisher, knew better than to let his shadow fall upon the water, but took good care to perch upon his watch tower at just the right angle so that he should throw no reflection, and the green, goggle eyes of the pickerel could not spy him. There was great excitement

along the banks of the creek one day, when Kos-ko-menos arose from the creek bearing the struggling old pickerel in his strong beak, and much interest as they watched him subdue and beat Kenozha until he could struggle no longer. All were glad; even Dee-dee-askh came screaming out of the forest, while grunts and chuckles of approval might be heard from many a retreat where hid the wood brothers. And 'tis said that even a soft, murmuring song of praise stirred among the whispering pines up aloft.

Soon after that time, the watchful ones noticed the beginning of a faint blue band across the breast feathers of the kingfisher. Gradually it deepened and widened, finally becoming a well-defined belt right across the pale yellow waistcoat of the kingfisher.

And ever since that time Kos-ko-menos and all his tribe after him continue to wear this badge of honour, this belt of azure blue, like belted knights of old. The kingfisher is no longer an outcast among the little brothers of the wood.

Source:

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