

THE FIRE-BRINGER[1]

By Sara Cone Bryant

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[1] Adapted from *The Basket Woman*, by Mary Austin.

This is the Indian story of how fire was brought to the tribes. It was long, long ago, when men and beasts talked together with understanding, and the grey Coyote was friend and counsellor of man.

There was a Boy of the tribe who was swift of foot and keen of eye, and he and the Coyote ranged the wood together. They saw the men catching fish in the creeks with their hands, and the women digging roots with sharp stones. This was in summer. But when winter came on, they saw the people running naked in the snow, or huddled in caves of the rocks, and most miserable. The Boy noticed this, and was very unhappy for the misery of his people.

“I do not feel it,” said the Coyote.

“You have a coat of good fur,” said the Boy, “and my people have not.”

“Come to the hunt,” said the Coyote.

“I will hunt no more, till I have found a way to help my people against the cold,” said the Boy. “Help me, O Counsellor!”

Then the Coyote ran away, and came back after a long time; he said he had found a way, but it was a hard way.

“No way is too hard,” said the Boy. So the Coyote told him that they must go to the Burning Mountain and bring fire to the people.

“What is fire?” said the Boy. And the Coyote told him that fire was red like a flower, yet not a flower; swift to run in the grass and to destroy, like a beast, yet no beast; fierce and hurtful, yet a good servant to keep one warm, if kept among stones and fed with small sticks.

“We will get this fire,” said the Boy.

First the Boy had to persuade the people to give him one hundred swift runners. Then he and they and the Coyote started at a good pace for the far away Burning Mountain. At the end of the first day’s trail they left the weakest of the runners, to wait; at the end of the second, the next stronger; at the end of the third, the next; and so for each of the hundred days of the journey; and the Boy was the strongest runner, and went to the last trail with the Counsellor. High mountains they crossed, and great plains, and giant woods, and at last they came to the Big Water, quaking along the sand at the foot of the Burning Mountain.

It stood up in a high peaked cone, and smoke rolled out from it endlessly along the sky. At night, the Fire Spirits danced, and the glare reddened the Big Water far out.

There the Counsellor said to the Boy, “Stay thou here till I bring thee a brand from the burning; be ready and right for running, for I shall be far spent when I come again, and the Fire Spirits will pursue me.”

Then he went up to the mountain; and the Fire Spirits only laughed when they saw him, for he looked so slinking, inconsiderable, and mean, that none of them thought harm from him. And in the night, when they were at their dance about the mountain, the Coyote stole the fire, and ran with it down the slope of the burning mountain. When the Fire Spirits saw what he had done they streamed out after him, red and angry, with a humming sound

like a swarm of bees. But the Coyote was still ahead; the sparks of the brand streamed out along his flanks, as he carried it in his mouth; and he stretched his body to the trail.

The Boy saw him coming, like a failing star against the mountain; he heard the singing sound of the Fire Spirits close behind, and the labouring breath of the Counsellor. And when the good beast panted down beside him, the Boy caught the brand from his jaws and was off, like an arrow from a bent bow. Out he shot on the homeward path, and the Fire Spirits snapped and sang behind him. But fast as they pursued he fled faster, till he saw the next runner standing in his place, his body bent for the running. To him he passed it, and it was off and away, with the Fire Spirits raging in chase.

So it passed from hand to hand, and the Fire Spirits tore after it through the scrub, till they came to the mountains of the snows; these they could not pass. Then the dark, sleek runners with the backward streaming brand bore it forward, shining starlike in the night, glowing red in sultry noons, violet pale in twilight glooms, until they came in safety to their own land.

And there they kept it among stones and fed it with small sticks, as the Counsellor advised; and it kept the people warm.

Ever after the Boy was called the Fire-Bringer; and ever after the Coyote bore the sign of the bringing, for the fur along his flanks was singed and yellow from the flames that streamed backward from the brand.