The Sly Etao And The Sea Demon

People everywhere in the world like to imagine spirits, ghosts, and other beings, whom they can blame for bad luck. American aviators in the war said that little people called “gremlins” rode in their airplanes and played harmful tricks.

Marshallese people once believed that certain spirits lived about them, often unseen. Some of them were half-human and half-spirit, and they could change their forms. Some were good and some were bad.
A half-bad, half-good god was Etao, whose name is a Marshallese word meaning “sly.” No one was more tricky and sly than he. He was blamed for many things. When bad things happened, people used to say, “Oh, Etao must have done it!”

Sometimes, he went around in the form of a handsome young man, living among human beings. But he could change himself into a lovely girl, an old man, an animal, a monster, a fish, a tree, a stone, or anything else.

“He’s dangerous, that Etao,” some people said. “He does bad things to people, and then he laughs at them.”

“Oh, he’s not really bad,” said others. “He just likes to play tricks.”

Sometimes, a man would see in a tree before him a large, ripe pandanus fruit. He would reach up and cut the stem. It would fall to the ground. It would no longer be a fruit, but Etao himself, standing there laughing at the poor man, whose mouth was watering for the taste of the fruit.

Once, Etao helped people to get rid of a monster. Leloran, a leatōktōk, lived in one of the islands. The leatōktōk of a village was an important man, a leader of the people, and this one was much respected.

Leloran found out something terrible, which he did not tell anyone. He was a good man. He wanted to protect the people from fear and danger. So he kept the secret to himself, but he acted in a strange way.

He would not let anyone but himself go out on the ocean in a canoe, not even to fish. And he called his servants every morning and gave them a strange command.

“Make jukjuk,” he said. “Make all you can, as fast as you can.”

“But why?” asked the servants.

“Never mind why. Just do it,” he said.

Jukjuk is breadfruit or taro, pounded together with bananas and coconut cream, to make a rich food. Leloran wanted more and more every morning. He asked members of his own family to make jukjuk, and he also asked all the people north, south, and everywhere else to bring piles of it, every day.

“Make it and bring it to me quickly,” he said.
The people thought at first that there would be a feast. But he had the men load the food into his canoe. Then he paddled away alone. He took all the food outside the reef and tossed it into the water!

The people could hardly believe what they saw. “First he stops our fishing, and then he throws good food away,” they said.

Leloran threw the food to a goudj, or octopus-demon of the sea. It had come to live near the shore in a deep cave made of coral heads. There it stayed, trying to catch people and eat them. It had many long arms and legs, a big mouth, and gleaming eyes.

Leloran worked fast, throwing out the jukjuk, but each day he was nearly caught by the octopus. A burst of air bubbles would come to the top of the water. When two more bursts of bubbles came, he knew that the demon was swimming upward. Then Leloran paddled away. The sea demon swam after him, trying to catch him.

As Leloran paddled, he sang a song for help:

“Sing loudly, Leloran, sing, sing!
Paddle fast to land, Leloran!
Paddle from the blue sea.
Everything flees with me, away from the demon.
The paddle flees; ‘chunk, chunk,’
The bailer flees, ‘chonk, chonk,’
Paddle, sing, paddle, sing,
Faster, louder, faster, louder,
Oh, beach, hurry, hurry, hurry—
Ah—the beach!”

Every day, for about a week, the poor leātoktok gathered food and paddled out to the ocean alone. Then one day, the first air bubbles came up very close to his canoe. There suddenly was the ugly octopus with its big mouth wide open!

Leloran paddled away fast, singing as he went. When he looked back, he saw that the demon had bitten off the end of his canoe and eaten it. He sang louder and louder and paddled faster and faster. When he looked back again, the demon had eaten up everything as far as the middle of the boat. Leloran moved forward, in what was left of the canoe. He kept on singing
and paddling, singing and paddling, louder and faster, louder and faster. The last time he looked back, the demon had already eaten up most of his canoe. So Leloran made a high, flying leap to shore and ran away, over the beach.

The sea demon ran along behind him. It thought that Leloran was a big bird that ran, flapping its wings.

The god Etao happened to be living near the shore at the time. The frightened leāтокток ran to Etao’s house. “Help me, oh help me, Etao!” he shouted.

“What’s the matter?” called Etao, from the doorway.

“There’s a sea demon after me, to eat me!”

“Oh ho! Some good fun can be had right now,” thought Etao to himself. But he said to Leloran, “Come into the house and get up under the roof. Be quick!”

The poor man did so, and just in time, for the sea demon came just then.

“Did you see a big bird flapping around up this way?” it asked.

“There’s no bird here, my friend,” said Etao, politely.

“Enana wot! Then I’ve been opening my mouth all this time for nothing,” said the demon.

Etao said, “Won’t you come in, please? Let’s sing, or tell each other some inoū.”

“What’s an inoū? Something to eat?” asked the demon.

“Oh no! Inoū are stories that everybody tells. I love stories. Don’t you?”

“No!”

“Oh, do come in,” said Etao. “It’s beginning to get dark now. That’s the best time for stories.”

“I’d much rather eat,” said the demon. “I smell good food somewhere.” However, it crawled into the house after Etao. They sat down on some mats.

“I’m tired,—so you begin,” said the demon.

“Oh no, that wouldn’t be polite. You first,” replied Etao.

“You,” said the demon. “No, you,” said Etao.

Finally, the demon said, “Oh, very well. I’ll sing the song that big bird was chanting when it ran away from me.”

The sea demon sang the leāтокток’s song in a croaking voice.
“Now it’s your turn,” it said.

Etao and the demon sang first one song and then another. Leloran, hiding under the thatch, was so frightened that he didn’t dare to move. At last, Etao sang a song that went something like this:

“Etao’s own music is sounding, sounding,
Making you dreamy, dreamy, drowsy, drowsy,
Closing your eyes, tight, tight, TIGHT!”

As he sang, Etao whirled in his hand his own special drēb, a little musical toy, such as Marshallese boys made from the rib of a green coconut leaf. The music had a steady sound, whirring, whirring. The music rose and fell and rose and fell, as Etao whirled it fast and slowly, fast and slowly. The demon became very, very sleepy. Then, it was fast asleep.

“Ho, ho! Now for some fun!” said Etao, jumping up.

He saw that the demon had long hair, very long eyebrows, and also long hair on its wrists and ankles. Etao took up the hair of one eyebrow and tied it fast to a post. Then he tied the other eyebrow to another one. He tied the demon’s hair to another post, and the hair on its ankles and wrists to others, until all the posts in the house were used.

Then he looked up under the thatch. “Come down, Leloran!” he called softly.

The leātōktōk came down. Etao set fire to the house on all sides. As soon as the demon felt the fire, it tried to get up, but it couldn’t pull itself loose. The house and the demon burned. Etao laughed. “See how clever I am?” he said.

When the leātōktōk went home, he told the people the story, and they were happy. Their good leader was safe, and he had saved them from the demon. They could go out to sea again in their canoes without fear.

Large sea animals are still to be seen in the Pacific Ocean. Sometimes, men in a canoe see something large floating far off upon the water. They hurry away, for a large octopus has tentacles long enough to pull a canoe under water.

Of course, the goudj, or octopus, that Leloran saw, was very much larger. It was as large as a storyteller could make it, while telling the story.