

Sheem, the Forsaken Boy

Cornelius Mathews

Native AmericanNorth American

Intermediate
26 min read

On a certain afternoon the sun was falling in the West, and in the midst of the ruddy silence a solitary lodge stood on the banks of a remote lake. One sound only broke, in the least degree, the forest stillness—the low breathing of the dying inmate, who was the head of a poor family. His wife and children surrounded the buffalo robe on which he lay. Of the children, two were almost grown up—a daughter and a son; the other was a boy, and a mere child in years.

All the skill of the household in their simple medicines was exhausted, and they stood looking on or moved about the lodge with whispered steps, awaiting the departure of the spirit. As one of the last acts of kindness, the skin door of the lodge had been thrown back to admit the fresh air of the evening. The poor man felt a momentary return of strength, and raising himself a little, he addressed his family.

“I leave you,” he said, “in a world of care, in which it has required all my strength and skill to supply you food, and to protect you from the storms and cold of a harsh climate.”

He cast his eyes upon his wife, and continued:

“For you, my partner in life, I have less sorrow, because I am persuaded you will not remain long behind me; but you, my children! my poor and forsaken children, who have just begun the career of life, who will shelter you from calamity? Listen to my words. Unkindness, ingratitude, and every wickedness, are in the scene before you. It was for this that years ago I withdrew from my kindred and my tribe to spend my days in this

lonely spot. I have contented myself with the company of your mother and yourselves, during seasons of very frequent scarcity and want, while your kindred, feasting in plenty, have caused the forests to echo with the shouts of successful war. I gave up these things for the enjoyment of peace. I wished to hide you away from the bad examples which would have spoiled your innocence. I have seen you, thus far, grow up in purity of heart. If we have sometimes suffered bodily want, we have escaped pain of mind. We have not been compelled to look on or to take a part with the red hand in scenes of rioting and bloodshed. My path now stops. I have arrived at the brink of the world. I will shut my eyes in peace if you, my children, will promise me to cherish each other. Let not your mother suffer during the few days that are left to her; and I charge you, on no account, to forsake your younger brother. Of him I give you both my dying command to have a tender care.”

He spoke no more, and as the sun fell out of view the light had gone from his face. The family stood still, as if they expected to hear something further; but when they came to his side and called him by name, his spirit did not answer. It was in another world.

The mother and daughter lamented aloud, but the elder son clothed himself in silence, as though it had been a mantle, and took his course as though nothing had occurred. He exerted himself to supply, with his bow and net, the wants of the little household, but he never made mention of his father.

Five moons had filled and waned, and the sixth was near its full, when the mother also died. In her last moments she pressed the fulfillment of their father’s wish.

The winter passed, and the spring, sparkling in the clear northern air, cheered the spirits of the lonely little people in the lodge.

The girl, being the eldest, directed her brothers, and she seemed to feel a tender and sisterly affection for the youngest, who was slight in frame and of a delicate temper. The other boy soon began to break forth with restless speeches, which showed that his spirit was not at ease. One day he addressed his sister as follows:

“My sister, are we always to live as if there were no other human beings in the world? Must I deprive myself of the pleasure of mingling with my own kind? I have determined this question for myself. I shall seek the villages of men, and you can not prevent me.”

The sister replied:

“I do not say no, my brother, to what you desire; we are not forbidden the society of our fellow-mortals, but we

are told to cherish each other, and to do nothing that shall not be agreeable to all our little household. Neither pleasure nor pain ought, therefore, to separate us, especially from our younger brother, who, being but a child, and weakly withal, is entitled to a double share of our affection. If we follow our separate fancies, it will surely make us neglect him, whom we are bound by vows, both to our father and mother, to support.”

The young man received this address in silence, and still took his course as though nothing out of the ordinary way had occurred. After awhile he seemed to recover his spirits; and as they lived in a large country, where there were open fields, the two brothers, at his invitation, often amused themselves in playing ball. One afternoon he chose the ground near to a beautiful lake, and they played and laughed with great spirit, and the ball was seldom allowed to touch the ground.

Now in this lake there happened to harbor a wicked old Manito, Mishosha by name, who looked at the brothers as they played, and he was vastly pleased with their nimbleness and beauty. He thought to himself, what shall I do to get these lads to accompany me? One of them shall hit the ball sideways, and it shall fall into my canoe.

It so happened, and it somehow seemed as if Owasso, the elder brother, had purposely given it that direction. When Owasso saw the old man, he professed to be greatly surprised, as was the other, Sheem by name, in truth, for he had not noticed the old Manito before.

“Bring the ball to us,” they both cried out. “Come to the shore.”

“No,” answered the old magician. He, however, came near enough for either of them to wade out to him.

“Come, come,” he said. “Come and get your ball.”

They insisted that he should come ashore, but he sturdily declined to oblige them.

“Very well,” said Owasso, “I will go and get it.” And he ran into the water. “Hand it to me,” he said, when he had approached near enough to receive it.

“Ha!” answered the Manito, “reach over and get it yourself.”

Owasso was about to grasp the ball, when the old magician suddenly seized him and pushed him into the boat.

“My grandfather,” said Owasso, “pray take my little brother also. Alone I can not go with you; he will starve if I leave him.”

Mishosha only laughed at him; then uttering the charmed words, "Chemaun Poll!" and giving his canoe a slap, it glided through the water, without further help, with the swiftness of an arrow.

In a short time they reached the magician's lodge, which stood upon the further shore, a little distance back from the lake. The two daughters of Mishosha were seated within. "My daughter," he said to his eldest, as they entered the lodge, "I have brought you a husband."

The young woman smiled; for Owasso was a comely youth to look upon. The magician told him to take his seat near her, and by this act the marriage ceremony was completed, and Owasso and the magician's daughter were man and wife, and in the course of time they had born to them a son.

But no sooner was Owasso in the family than the old Manito wished him out of the way, and he went about in his own wicked fashion to compass it.

One day he asked his son-in-law to go out a-fishing with him. They started without delay; for the magician had only to speak, and off went the canoe. They reached a solitary bay in an island, a very dark, lonely, and out-of-the-way place. The Manito advised Owasso to spear a large sturgeon which came alongside, and with its great glassy eye turned up, seemed to recognize the magician. Owasso rose in the boat to dart his spear, and by speaking that moment to his canoe, Mishosha shot forward and hurled his son-in-law headlong into the water; where, leaving him to struggle for himself, he was soon out of sight.

Owasso, being himself gifted with limited magical powers, spoke to the fish, and bade him swim toward the lodge, while he carried him along, which he did at great speed. Once he directed the sturgeon to rise near the surface of the water, so that he might, if possible, get a view of the magician. The fish obeyed, and Owasso saw the wicked old Manito busy in another direction, fishing, as unconcerned as though he had not just lost a member of his family.

On went the fish, and on went Owasso, till they reached the shore, near the magician's lodge, in advance of him. He then spoke kindly to the sturgeon, and told him he should not be angry with him for having speared him, as he was created to be meat for man. The sturgeon made no reply, or if he did, it has not been reported; and Owasso, drawing him on shore, went up and told his wife to dress and cook it immediately. By the time it was prepared the magician had come in sight.

"Your grandfather has arrived," said the woman to her son; "go and see what he brings, and eat this as you

go”—handing a piece of the fish.

The boy went, and the magician no sooner saw him with the fish in his hand, than he asked him, “What are you eating? and who brought it?”

He replied, “My father brought it.”

The magician began to feel uneasy, for he found that he had been outwitted; he, however, put on a grave face, and entering the lodge, acted as if nothing unusual had happened.

Some days after this, Mishosha again requested his son-in-law to accompany him; and Owasso, without hesitation, said “Yes!”

They went out, and, in a rapid passage, they arrived at a solitary island, which was no more than a heap of high and craggy rocks.

The magician said to Owasso, “Go on shore, my son, and pick up all the gulls’ eggs you can find.”

The rocks were strewn with eggs, and the air resounded with the cry of the birds as they saw them gathered up by Owasso.

The old magician took the opportunity to speak to the gulls. “I have long wished,” he said, “to offer you something. I now give you this young man for food.”

He then uttered the charm to his canoe, and it shot out of sight, leaving Owasso to make his peace the best way he could.

The gulls flew in immense numbers around him, and were ready to devour him. Owasso did not lose his presence of mind, but he addressed them and said:

“Gulls, you know you were not formed to eat human flesh, nor was man made to be the prey of birds. Obey my words. Fly close together, a sufficient number of you, and carry me on your backs to the magician’s lodge.”

They listened attentively to what he said, and seeing nothing unreasonable in his request, they obeyed him, and Owasso soon found himself sailing through the air swiftly homeward.

Meanwhile, it appears that the old magician had fallen asleep and allowed his canoe to come to a stand-still; for

Owasso, in his flight over the lake, saw him lying on his back in the boat, taking a nap, which was quite natural, as the day was very soft and balmy.

As Owasso, with his convoy of birds, passed over, he let fall, directly in the face of the old magician, a capful of gulls' eggs, which broke and so besmeared his eyes that he could barely see. He jumped up and exclaimed:

"It is always so with these thoughtless birds. They never consider where they drop their eggs."

Owasso had flown on and reached the lodge in safety, and, excusing himself for the liberty, he killed two or three of the gulls for the sake of their feathers to ornament his son's head.

When the magician arrived, soon after, his grandson came out to meet him, tossing his head about as the feathers danced and struggled with the wind.

"Where did you get these?" asked the Manito, "and who brought them?"

"My father brought them," the boy replied.

The old magician was quite distressed in his mind that he had not destroyed his son-in-law. He entered his lodge in silence, and set his wits busily at work again to contrive some plan for easing his feelings in that respect.

He could not help saying to himself:

"What manner of boy is this who is ever escaping from my power? But his guardian spirit shall not save him. I will entrap him to-morrow. Ha, ha, ha!"

He was painfully aware that he had tried two of his charms without effect, and that he had but two more left. He now professed to be more friendly with his son-in-law than ever, and the very next day he said to Owasso:

"Come, my son, you must go with me to procure some young eagles. We will tame them, and have them for pets about the lodge. I have discovered an island where they are in great abundance."

They started on the trip, and when, after traversing an immense waste of water, they had reached the island, Mishosha led him inland until they came to the foot of a tall pine-tree, upon which the nests were to be found.

"Now, my son," said Mishosha, "climb up this tree and bring down the birds. I think you will get some fine ones

up there.”

Owasso obeyed. When he had with great difficulty got near the nest, Mishosha cried out, addressing himself to the tree, and without much regard to the wishes of Owasso:

“Now stretch yourself up and be very tall.”

The tree, at this bidding, rose up so far that Owasso would have imperiled his neck by any attempt to get to the ground.

“Listen, ye eagles!” continued Mishosha. “You have long expected a gift from me. I now present you this boy, who has had the presumption to climb up where you are to molest your young. Stretch forth your claws and seize him.”

So saying, the old magician, according to his custom in such cases, turned his back upon Owasso, and going off in his canoe at a word, he left his son-in-law to shift for himself.

But the birds did not seem to be so badly-minded as the old magician had supposed; for a very old bald eagle, quite corpulent and large of limb, alighting on a branch just opposite, opened conversation with him by asking what had brought him there.

Owasso replied that he had not mounted the tree of himself, or out of any disposition to harm his people; that his father-in-law, the old magician who had just left them, had sent him up; that he was constantly sending him on mischievous errands. In a word, the young man was enlarging at great length upon the character of the wicked Manito, when he was interrupted by being darted upon by a hungry-eyed bird, with long claws.

Owasso, not in the least disconcerted, boldly seized this fierce eagle by the neck and dashed it against the rocks, crying out:

“Thus will I deal with all who come near me.”

The old eagle, who appeared to be the head of the tribe, was so pleased with this show of spirit that he immediately appointed two tall birds, uncommonly strong in the wings, to transport Owasso to his lodge. They were to take turns in conducting him through the air.

Owasso expressed many obligations to the old eagle for his kindness, and they forthwith set out. It was a high

point from which they started, for the pine-tree had shot far, far up toward the clouds, and they could even descry the enchanted island where the old magician lived; though it was miles and miles away. For this point they steered their flight; and in a short time they landed Owasso at the door of the lodge.

With many compliments for their dispatch, Owasso dismissed the birds, and stood ready to greet his wicked father-in-law who now arrived; and when he espied his son-in-law still unharmed, Mishosha grew very black in the face. He had but a single charm left.

He thought he would ponder deeply how he could employ that to the best advantage; and it happened that while he was doing so, one evening, as Owasso and his wife were sitting on the banks of the lake, and the soft breeze swept over it, they heard a song, as if sung by some one at a great distance. The sound continued for some time, and then died away in perfect stillness. "Oh, it is the voice of Sheem," cried Owasso. "It is the voice of my brother! If I could but only see him!" And he hung down his head in deep anguish.

His wife witnessed his distress, and to comfort him she proposed that they should attempt to make their escape, and carry him succor on the morrow.

When the morning came, and the sun shone warmly into the lodge, the wife of Owasso offered to comb her father's hair, with the hope that it would soothe him to sleep. It had that effect; and they no sooner saw him in deep slumber than they seized the magic canoe, Owasso uttered the charmed words, "Chemaun Poll!" and they glided away upon the water without need of oar or sail.

They had nearly reached the land on the opposite side of the lake, and could distinctly hear the voice of the younger brother singing his lament as before, when the old magician wakened. Missing his daughter and her husband, he suspected deception of some kind; he looked for his magic boat and found it gone. He spoke the magic words, which were more powerful from him than from any other person in the world, and the canoe immediately returned; to the sore disappointment of Owasso and his wife.

When they came back to the shore, Mishosha stood upon the beach and drew up his canoe. He did not utter a word. The son-in-law and daughter entered the lodge in silence.

The time, walking along in its broad open path, brought the autumn months to a close, and the winter had set in. Soon after the first fall of snow, Owasso said:

"Father, I wish to try my skill in hunting. It is said there is plenty of game not far off, and it can now be easily

tracked. Let us go.”

The magician consented; they set out, and arriving at a good ground for their sport, they spent the day in hunting. Night coming on, they built themselves a lodge of pine-branches to sleep in. Although it was bitterly cold, the young man took off his leggings and moccasins, and hung them up to dry. The old magician did the same, carefully hanging his own in a separate place, and they lay down to sleep.

Owasso, from a glance he had given, suspected that the magician had a mind to play him a trick, and to be beforehand with him, he watched an opportunity to get up and change the moccasins and leggings, putting his own in the place of Mishosha's, and depending on the darkness of the lodge to help him through.

Near daylight, the old magician bestirred himself, as if to rekindle the fire; but he slyly reached down a pair of moccasins and leggings with a stick, and thinking they were no other than those of Owasso's, he dropped them into the flames; while he cast himself down, and affected to be lost in a heavy sleep. The leather leggings and moccasins soon drew up and were burned.

Instantly jumping up and rubbing his eyes, Mishosha cried out:

“Son-in-law, your moccasins are burning; I know it by the smell.”

Owasso rose up, deliberately and unconcerned.

“No, my friend,” said he, “here are mine,” at the same time taking them down and drawing them on. “It is your moccasins that are burning.”

Mishosha dropped his head upon his breast. All his tricks were played out—there was not so much as half a one left to help him out of the sorry plight he was in.

“I believe, my grandfather,” added Owasso, “that this is the moon in which fire attracts, and I fear you must have set your foot and leg garments too near the fire, and they have been drawn in. Now let us go forth to the hunt.”

The old magician was compelled to follow him, and they pushed out into a great storm of snow, and hail, and wind, which had come on over night; and neither the wind, the hail, nor the snow, had the slightest respect for the bare limbs of the old magician, for there was not the least virtue of magic in those parts of old Mishosha's body. After a while they quite stiffened under him, his body became hard, and the hair bristled in the cold

wind, so that he looked to Owasso—who turned away from him, leaving the wicked old magician alone to ponder upon his past life—to Owasso he looked like a tough old sycamore-tree more than a highly-gifted old magician.

Owasso himself reached home in safety, proof against all kinds of weather, and the magic canoe became the exclusive property of the young man and his wife.

During all this part of Owasso's stay at the lodge of Mishosha, his sister, whom he had left on the main land with Sheem, their younger brother, had labored with good-will to supply the lodge. She knew enough of the arts of the forest to provide their daily food, and she watched her little brother, and tended his wants, with all of a good sister's care. By times she began to be weary of solitude and of her charge. No one came to be a witness of her constancy, or to let fall a single word in her mother-tongue. She could not converse with the birds and beasts about her, and she felt, to the bottom of her heart, that she was alone. In these thoughts she forgot her younger brother; she almost wished him dead; for it was he alone that kept her from seeking the companionship of others.

One day, after collecting all the provisions she had been able to reserve from their daily use, and bringing a supply of wood to the door, she said to her little brother:

“My brother, you must not stray from the lodge. I am going to seek our elder brother. I shall be back soon.”

She then set the lodge in perfect order, and, taking her bundle, she set off in search of habitations. These she soon found, and in the enjoyment of the pleasures and pastimes of her new acquaintance, she began to think less and less of her little brother, Sheem. She accepted proposals of marriage, and from that time she utterly forgot the abandoned boy.

As for poor little Sheem, he was soon brought to the pinching turn of his fate. As soon as he had eaten all of the food left in the lodge, he was obliged to pick berries, and live off of such roots as he could dig with his slender hands. As he wandered about in search of wherewithal to stay his hunger, he often looked up to heaven, and saw the gray clouds going up and down. And then he looked about upon the wide earth, but he never saw sister nor brother returning from their long delay.

At last, even the roots and berries gave out. They were blighted by the frost or hidden out of reach by the snow, for the mid-winter had come on, and poor little Sheem was obliged to leave the lodge and wander away in

search of food.

Sometimes he was enforced to pass the night in the clefts of old trees or caverns, and to break his fast with the refuse meals of the savage wolves.

These at last became his only resource, and he grew to be so little fearful of these animals that he would sit by them while they devoured their meat, and patiently await his share.

After a while, the wolves took to little Sheem very kindly, and seeming to understand his outcast condition, they would always leave something for him to eat. By and by they began to talk with him, and to inquire into his history. When he told them that he had been forsaken by his brother and his sister, the wolves turned about to each other, lifted up their eyes to heaven, and wondered among themselves, with raised paws, that such a thing should have been.

In this way, Sheem lived on till the spring, and as soon as the lake was free from ice, he followed his new friends to the shore.

It happened on the same day, that his elder brother, Owasso, was fishing in his magic canoe, a considerable distance out upon the lake; when he thought he heard the cries of a child upon the shore. He wondered how any human creature could exist on so bleak and barren a coast.

He listened again with all attention, and he heard the cry distinctly repeated; and this time it was the well-known cry of his younger brother that reached his ear. He knew too well the secret of his song, as he heard him chaunting mournfully:

“My brother! My brother! Since you left me going in the canoe, a-hee-ee, I am half changed into a wolf, E-wee. I am half changed into a wolf, E-wee.”

Owasso made for the shore, and as he approached the lament was repeated. The sounds were very distinct, and the voice of wailing was very sorrowful for Owasso to listen to, and it touched him the more that it died away at the close, into a long-drawn howl, like that of the wolf.

In the sand, as he drew closer to the land, he saw the tracks as of that animal fleeing away; and besides these the prints of human hands. But what were the pity and astonishment that smote Owasso to the heart when he espied his poor little brother—poor little forsaken Sheem—half boy and half wolf, flying along the shore.

Owasso immediately leaped upon the ground and strove to catch him in his arms, saying soothingly, “My brother! my brother! Come to me.”

But the poor wolf-boy avoided his grasp, crying, as he fled, “Neesia, neesia. Since you left me going in the canoe, a-he-ee, I am half changed into a wolf, E-wee. I am half changed into a wolf, E-wee!” and howling between these words of lament.

The elder brother, sore at heart, and feeling all of his brotherly affection strongly returning, with renewed anguish, cried out, “My brother! my brother! my brother!”

But the nearer he approached to poor Sheem, the faster he fled, and the more rapidly the change went on; the boy-wolf by turns singing and howling, and calling out the name, first of his brother and then of his sister, till the change was complete. He leaped upon a bank, and looking back, and casting upon Owasso a glance of deep reproach and grief, he exclaimed, “I am a wolf!” and disappeared in the woods.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com