



The Bird Lover

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In a region of country where the forest and the prairie strived which should be the most beautiful—the open plain, with its free sunshine and winds and flowers, or the close wood, with its delicious twilight-walks and enamored haunts—there lived a wicked manito in the disguise of an old Indian.

Although the country furnished an abundance of game, and whatever else a good heart could wish for, it was the study of this wicked genius to destroy such as fell into his hands. He made use of all his arts to decoy men into his power, for the purpose of killing them. The country had been once thickly peopled, but this Mudjee Monedo had so thinned it by his cruel practices, that he now lived almost solitary in the wilderness.

The secret of his success lay in his great speed. He had the power to assume the shape of any four-footed creature, and it was his custom to challenge such as he sought to destroy, to run with him. He had a beaten path on which he ran, leading around a large lake, and he always ran around this circle so that the starting and the winning-post was the same. Whoever failed as every one had, yielded up his life at this post; and although he ran every day, no man was ever known to beat this evil genius; for whenever he was pressed hard, he changed himself into a fox, wolf, deer, or other swift-footed animal, and was thus able to leave his competitor behind.

The whole country was in dread of this same Mudjee Monedo, and yet the young men were constantly running

with him; for if they refused, he called them cowards, which was a reproach they could not bear. They would rather die than be called cowards.

To keep up his sport, the manito made light of these deadly foot-matches, and instead of assuming a braggart air, and going about in a boastful way, with the blood of such as he had overcome, upon his hands, he adopted very pleasing manners, and visited the lodges around the country as any other sweet-tempered and harmless old Indian might.

His secret object in these friendly visits was to learn whether the young boys were getting old enough to run with him; he kept a very sharp eye upon their growth, and the day he thought them ready, he did not fail to challenge them to a trial on his racing-ground.

There was not a family in all that beautiful region which had not in this way been visited and thinned out; and the manito had quite naturally come to be held in abhorrence by all the Indian mothers in the country.

It happened that there lived near him a poor widow woman, whose husband and seven sons he had made way with; and she was now living with an only daughter, and a son of ten or twelve years old.

This widow was very poor and feeble, and she suffered so much for lack of food and other comforts of the lodge, that she would have been glad to die, but for her daughter and her little son. The Mudjee Monedo had already visited her lodge to observe whether the boy was sufficiently grown to be challenged to the race; and so crafty in his approaches and so soft in his manners was the monedo, that the mother feared that he would yet decoy the son and make way with him as he had done with his father and his seven brothers, in spite of all her struggles to save him.

And yet she strove with all her might to strengthen her son in every good course. She taught him, as best she could, what was becoming for the wise hunter and the brave warrior. She remembered and set before him all that she could recall of the skill and the craft of his father and his brothers who were lost.

The widow woman also instructed her daughter in whatever could make her useful as a wife; and in the leisure-time of the lodge, she gave her lessons in the art of working with the quills of porcupine, and bestowed on her such other accomplishments as should make her an ornament and a blessing to her husband's household. The daughter, Minda by name, was kind and obedient to her mother, and never failed in her duty. Their lodge

stood high up on the banks of a lake, which gave them a wide prospect of country, embellished with groves and open fields, which waved with the blue light of their long grass, and made, at all hours of sun and moon, a cheerful scene to look upon.

Across this beautiful prairie, Minda had one morning made her way to gather dry limbs for their fire; for she disdained no labor of the lodge. And while enjoying the sweetness of the air and the green beauty of the woods, she strolled far away.

She had come to a bank, painted with flowers of every hue, and was reclining on its fragrant couch, when a bird, of red and deep-blue plumage softly blended, alighted on a branch near by, and began to pour forth its carol. It was a bird of strange character, such as she had never before seen. Its first note was so delicious to the ear of Minda, and it so pierced to her young heart, that she listened as she had never before to any mortal or heavenly sound. It seemed like the human voice, forbidden to speak, and uttering its language through this wild wood-chant with a mournful melody, as if it bewailed the lack of the power or the right to make itself more plainly intelligible.

The voice of the bird rose and fell, and circled round and round, but whithersoever floated or spread out its notes, they seemed ever to have their center where Minda sat; and she looked with sad eyes into the sad eyes of the mournful bird, that sat in his red and deep-blue plumage just opposite to the flowery bank.

The poor bird strove more and more with his voice, and seemed ever more and more anxiously to address his notes of lament to Minda's ear, till at last she could not refrain from saying, "What aileth thee, sad bird?"

As if he had but waited to be spoken to, the bird left his branch, and alighting upon the bank, smiled on Minda, and, shaking his shining plumage, answered:

"I am bound in this condition until a maiden shall accept me in marriage. I have wandered these groves and sung to many and many of the Indian girls, but none ever heeded my voice till you. Will you be mine?" he added, and poured forth a flood of melody which sparkled and spread itself with its sweet murmurs over all the scene, and fairly entranced the young Minda, who sat silent, as if she feared to break the charm by speech.

The bird, approaching nearer, asked her, if she loved him, to get her mother's consent to their marriage. "I shall be free then," said the bird, "and you shall know me as I am."

Minda lingered, and listened to the sweet voice of the bird in its own forest notes, or filling each pause with gentle human discourse; questioning her as to her home, her family, and the little incidents of her daily life.

She returned to the lodge later than usual, but she was too timid to speak to her mother of that which the bird had charged her. She returned again and again to the fragrant haunt in the wood; and everyday she listened to the song and the discourse of her bird admirer with more pleasure, and he every day besought her to speak to her mother of the marriage. This she could not, however, muster heart and courage to do.

At last the widow began herself to have a suspicion that her daughter's heart was in the wood, from her long delays in returning, and the little success she had in gathering the fire-branches for which she went in search.

In answer to her mother's questions, Minda revealed the truth, and made known her lover's request. The mother, considering the lonely and destitute condition of her little household, gave her consent.

The daughter, with light steps, hastened with the news to the wood. The bird lover of course heard it with delight, and fluttered through the air in happy circles, and poured forth a song of joy which thrilled Minda to the heart.

He said that he would come to the lodge at sunset, and immediately took wing, while Minda hung fondly upon his flight, till he was lost far away in the blue sky.

With the twilight the bird lover, whose name was Monedowa, appeared at the door of the lodge, as a hunter, with a red plume and a mantle of blue upon his shoulders.

He addressed the widow as his friend, and she directed him to sit down beside her daughter, and they were regarded as man and wife.

Early on the following morning, he asked for the bow and arrows of those who had been slain by the wicked manito, and went out a-hunting. As soon as he had got out of sight of the lodge, he changed himself into the wood-bird, as he had been before his marriage, and took his flight through the air.

Although game was scarce in the neighborhood of the widow's lodge, Monedowa returned at evening, in his character of a hunter, with two deer. This was his daily practice, and the widow's family never more lacked for food.

It was noticed, however, that Monedowa himself ate but little, and that of a peculiar kind of meat, flavored with berries, which, with other circumstances, convinced them that he was not as the Indian people around him.

In a few days his mother-in-law told him that the manito would come to pay them a visit, to see how the young man, her son, prospered.

Monedowa answered that he should on that day be absent. When the time arrived, he flew upon a tall tree, overlooking the lodge, and took his station there as the wicked manito passed in.

The mudjee monedo cast sharp glances at the scaffolds so well laden with meat, and as soon as he had entered, he said, "Why, who is it that is furnishing you with meat so plentifully?"

"No one," she answered, "but my son; he is just beginning to kill deer."

"No, no," he retorted; "some one is living with you."

"Kaween, no indeed," replied the widow; "you are only making sport of my hapless condition. Who do you think would come and trouble themselves about me?"

"Very well," answered the manito, "I will go; but on such a day I will again visit you, and see who it is that furnishes the meat, and whether it is your son or not."

He had no sooner left the lodge and got out of sight, than the son-in-law made his appearance with two more deer. On being made acquainted with the conduct of the manito, "Very well," he said, "I will be at home the next time, to see him."

Both the mother and the wife urged Monedowa to be aware of the manito. They made known to him all of his cruel courses, and assured him that no man could escape from his power.

"No matter," said Monedowa; "if he invites me to the race-ground, I will not be backward. What follows, may teach him, my mother, to show pity on the vanquished, and not to trample on the widow and those who are without fathers."

When the day of the visit of the manito arrived, Monedowa told his wife to prepare certain pieces of meat, which he pointed out to her, together with two or three buds of the birch-tree, which he requested her to put in the pot. He directed also that the manito should be hospitably received, as if he had been just the kind-hearted old Indian he professed to be. Monedowa then dressed himself as a warrior, embellishing his visage with tints of red, to show that he was prepared for either war or peace.

As soon as the mudjee monedo arrived, he eyed this strange warrior whom he had never seen before; but he dissembled, as usual, and, with a gentle laugh, said to the widow, "Did I not tell you that some one was staying with you, for I knew your son was too young to hunt."

The widow excused herself by saying that she did not think it necessary to tell him, inasmuch as he was a manito, and must have known before he asked.

The manito was very pleasant with Monedowa, and after much other discourse, in a gentle-spoken voice, he invited him to the racing-ground, saying it was a manly amusement, that he would have an excellent chance to meet there with other warriors, and that he should himself be pleased to run with him.

Monedowa would have excused himself, saying that he knew nothing of running.

"Why," replied the mudjee monedo, trembling in every limb as he spoke, "don't you see how old I look, while you are young and full of life. We must at least run a little to amuse others."

“Be it so, then,” replied Monedowa. “I will oblige you. I will go in the morning.”

Pleased with his crafty success, the manito would have now taken his leave, but he was pressed to remain and partake of their hospitality. The meal was immediately prepared. But one dish was used.

Monedowa partook of it first, to show his guest that he need not fear, saying at the same time, “It is a feast, and as we seldom meet, we must eat all that is placed on the dish, as a mark of gratitude to the Great Spirit for permitting me to kill animals, and for the pleasure of seeing you, and partaking of it with you.”

They ate and talked, on this and that, until they had nearly dispatched the meal, when the manito took up the dish and drank off the broth at a breath. On setting it down he immediately turned his head and commenced coughing with great violence. The old body in which he had disguised himself was well-nigh shaken in pieces, for he had, as Monedowa expected, swallowed a grain of the birch-bud, and this, which relished to himself as being of the bird nature, greatly distressed the old manito, who partook of the character of an animal, or four-footed thing.

He was at last put to such confusion of face by his constant coughing, that he was enforced to leave, saying, or rather hiccoughing as he left the lodge, that he should look for the young man at the racing-ground in the morning.

When the morning came, Monedowa was early astir, oiling his limbs and enameling his breast and arms with red and blue, resembling the plumage in which he had first appeared to Minda. Upon his brow he placed a tuft of feathers of the same shining tints.

By his invitation his wife, Minda, the mother and her young son, attended Monedowa to the manito’s racing-ground.

The lodge of the manito stood upon a high ground, and near it stretched out a long row of other lodges, said to be possessed by wicked kindred of his, who shared in the spoils of his cruelty.

As soon as the young hunter and his party approached, the inmates appeared at their lodge-doors and cried out:

“We are visited.”

At this cry, the mudjee monedo came forth and descended with his companions to the starting-post on the plain. From this the course could be seen, winding in a long girdle about the lake; and as they were now all assembled, the old manito began to speak of the race, belted himself up and pointed to the post, which was an upright pillar of stone.

“But before we start,” said the manito, “I wish it to be understood that when men run with me I make a wager, and I expect them to abide by it—life against life.”

“Very well—be it so,” answered Monedowa. “We shall see whose head is to be dashed against the stone.”

“We shall,” rejoined the mudjee monedo. “I am very old, but I shall try and make a run.”

“Very well,” again rejoined Monedowa; “I hope we shall both stand to our bargain.”

“Good!” said the old manito; and he at the same time cast a sly glance at the young hunter, and rolled his eyes toward where stood the pillar of stone.

“I am ready,” said Monedowa.

The starting shout was given, and they set off at high speed, the manito leading, and Monedowa pressing closely after. As he closed upon him, the old manito began to show his power, and changing himself into a fox he passed the young hunter with ease, and went leisurely along.

Monedowa now, with a glance upward, took the shape of the strange bird of red and deep-blue plumage, and with one flight, lighting at some distance ahead of the manito, resumed his mortal shape.

When the mudjee monedo espied his competitor before him, “Whoa! whoa!” he exclaimed; “this is strange;” and he immediately changed himself into a wolf, and sped past Monedowa.

As he galloped by, Monedowa heard a noise from his throat, and he knew that he was still in distress from the birch-bud which he had swallowed at his mother-in-law’s lodge.

Monedowa again took wing, and, shooting into the air, he descended suddenly with great swiftness, and took

the path far ahead of the old manito.

As he passed the wolf he whispered in his ear:

“My friend, is this the extent of your speed?”

The manito began to be troubled with bad forebodings, for, on looking ahead, he saw the young hunter in his own manly form, running along at leisure. The mudjee monedo, seeing the necessity of more speed, now passed Monedowa in the shape of a deer.

They were now far around the circle of the lake, and fast closing in upon the starting-post, when Monedowa, putting on his red and blue plumage, glided along the air and alighted upon the track far in advance.

To overtake him, the old manito assumed the shape of the buffalo; and he pushed on with such long gallops that he was again the foremost on the course. The buffalo was the last change he could make, and it was in this form that he had most frequently conquered.

The young hunter, once more a bird, in the act of passing the manito, saw his tongue lolling from his mouth with fatigue.

“My friend,” said Monedowa, “is this all your speed?”

The manito made no answer. Monedowa had resumed his character of a hunter, and was within a run of the winning-post, when the wicked manito had nearly overtaken him.

“Bakah! bakah! nejee!” he called out to Monedowa; “stop, my friend, I wish to talk to you.”

Monedowa laughed aloud as he replied:

“I will speak to you at the starting-post. When men run with me I make a wager, and I expect them to abide by it—life against life.”

One more flight as the blue bird with red wings, and Monedowa was so near to the goal that he could easily reach it in his mortal shape. Shining in beauty, his face lighted up like the sky, with tinted arms and bosom gleaming in the sun, and the parti-colored plume on his brow waving in the wind. Monedowa, cheered by a

joyful shout from his own people, leaped to the post.

The manito came on with fear in his face.

“My friend,” he said, “spare my life;” and then added, in a low voice, as if he would not that the others should hear it, “Give me to live.” And he began to move off as if the request had been granted.

“As you have done to others,” replied Monedowa, “so shall it be done to you.”

And seizing the wicked manito, he dashed him against the pillar of stone. His kindred, who were looking on in horror, raised a cry of fear and fled away in a body to some distant land, whence they have never returned.

The widow’s family left the scene, and when they had all come out into the open fields, they walked on together until they had reached the fragrant bank and the evergreen wood, where the daughter had first encountered her bird lover.

Monedowa turning to her, said:

“My mother, here we must part. Your daughter and myself must now leave you. The Good Spirit, moved with pity, has allowed me to be your friend. I have done that for which I was sent. I am permitted to take with me the one whom I love. I have found your daughter ever kind, gentle and just. She shall be my companion. The blessing of the Good Spirit be ever with you. Farewell, my mother—my brother, farewell.”

While the widow woman was still lost in wonder at these words, Monedowa, and Minda his wife, changed at the same moment, rose into the air, as beautiful birds, clothed in shining colors of red and blue.

They caroled together as they flew, and their songs were happy, and falling, falling, like clear drops, as they rose, and rose, and winged their way far upward, a delicious peace came into the mind of the poor widow woman, and she returned to her lodge deeply thankful at heart for all the goodness that had been shown to her by the Master of Life.

From that day forth she never knew want, and her young son proved a comfort to her lodge, and the tuneful carol of Monedowa and Minda, as it fell from heaven, was a music always, go whither she would, sounding peace and joy in her ear.

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