

The Crane That Crossed the River

Cornelius Mathews

Native Americannorth American

Intermediate
8 min read

A famous hunter who lived in a remote part of the North had a fair wife and two sons, who were left in the lodge every day while he went out in quest of the animals whose flesh was their principal support.

Game was very abundant in those days, and his labors in the chase were well rewarded. They lived a long distance from any other lodge, and it was seldom that they saw any other faces than those of their own household.

The two sons were still too young to follow their father in the hunt, and they were in the habit of diverting themselves within reach of the lodge.

While thus engaged, they began to take note that a young man visited the lodge during their father's absence, and that these visits were constantly renewed.

At length the elder of the two said to his mother:

“My mother, who is this tall young man that comes here so often during our father's absence? Does he wish to see him? Shall I tell him when he comes back this evening?”

“Naubesah, you little fool,” said the mother, “mind your bow and arrows, and do not be afraid to enter the forest in search of birds and squirrels, with your little brother. It is not manly to be ever about the lodge. Nor will you become a warrior if you tell all the little things that you see and hear to your father. Say not a word to

him.”

The boys obeyed, but as they grew older and still noticed the visits of the stranger, they resolved to speak again to their mother.

They now told her that they meant to make known to their father all that they had witnessed, for they frequently saw this young man passing through the woods, and he did not walk in the path, nor did he carry any thing to eat. If he had any message to deliver at their lodge, why did he not give it to their father? for they had observed that messages were always addressed to men, and not to women.

When her sons spoke thus to her, the mother was greatly vexed.

“I will kill you,” she said, “if you speak of it.”

In fear they for a time held their peace, but still taking note that the stranger came so often and by stealth to the lodge, they resolved at last to speak with their father.

Accordingly one day, when they were out in the woods, learning to follow the chase, they told him all that they had seen.

The face of the father grew dark. He was still for a while, and when at length he looked up—

“It is done!” he said. “Do you, my children, tarry here until the hour of the falling of the sun, then come to the lodge and you will find me.”

The father left them at a slow pace, and they remained sporting away their time till the hour for their return had come.

When they reached the lodge the mother was not there. They dared not to ask their father whither she had gone, and from that day forth her name was never spoken again in the lodge.

In course of time the two boys had grown to be men, and although the mother was never more seen in the lodge, in charge of her household tasks, nor on the path in the forest, nor by the river side, she still lingered, ever and ever, near the lodge.

Changed, but the same, with ghastly looks and arms that were withered, she appeared to her sons as they returned from the hunt, in the twilight, in the close of the day.

At night she darkly unlatched the lodge-door and glided in, and bent over them as they sought to sleep. Oftenest it was her bare brow, white, and bony, and bodyless, that they saw floating in the air, and making a mock of them in the wild paths of the forest, or in the midnight darkness of the lodge.

She was a terror to all their lives, and she made every spot where they had seen her, hideous to the living eye; so that after being long buffeted and beset, they at last resolved, together with their father, now stricken in years, to leave the country.

They began a journey toward the South. After traveling many days along the shore of a great lake, they passed around a craggy bluff, and came upon a scene where there was a rough fall of waters, and a river issuing forth from the lake.

They had no sooner come in sight of this fall of water, than they heard a rolling sound behind them, and looking back, they beheld the skull of a woman rolling along the beach. It seemed to be pursuing them, and it came on with great speed; when, behold, from out of the woods hard by, appeared a headless body, which made for the beach with the utmost dispatch.

The skull too advanced toward it, and when they looked again, lo! they had united, and were making all haste to come up with the hunter and his two sons. They now might well be in extreme fear, for they knew not how to escape her.

At this moment, one of them looked out and saw a stately crane sitting on a rock in the middle of the rapids. They called out to the bird, "See, grandfather, we are persecuted. Come and take us across the falls that we may escape her."

The crane so addressed was of extraordinary size, and had arrived at a great old age, and, as might be expected, he sat, when first descried by the two sons, in a state of profound thought, revolving his long experience of life there in the midst of the most violent eddies.

When he heard himself appealed to, the crane stretched forth his neck with great deliberation, and lifting

himself slowly by his wings, he flew across to their assistance.

“Be careful,” said the old crane, “that you do not touch the crown of my head. I am bald from age and long service, and very tender at that spot. Should you be so unlucky as to lay a hand upon it, I shall not be able to avoid throwing you both in the rapids.”

They paid strict heed to his directions, and were soon safely landed on the other shore of the river. He returned and carried the father in the same way; and then took his place once more where he had been first seen in the very midst of the eddies of the stream.

But the woman, who had by this time reached the shore, cried out, “Come, my grandfather, and carry me over, for I have lost my children, and I am sorely distressed.”

The aged bird obeyed her summons, and flew to her side. He carefully repeated the warning that she was not to touch the crown of his head; and he was so anxious that she should take it to heart, that he went over it a second and a third time, word by word. He begged her to bear in mind that she should respect his old age, if there was any sense of virtue left in her.

She promised to obey; but they were no sooner fairly embarked in the stream, than she stealthily sought to disregard the warning she had received. Instantly the crane cast her into the rapids, and shook his wings as if to free himself of all acquaintance with her.

“There,” said he, as she sunk in the stream, “you would ever do what was forbidden. In life, as you sought those you should have avoided, so now you shall be avoided by those who should seek you. Go, and be henceforth Addum Kum Maig!”

The woman disappeared, was straightway carried by the rapid currents far out into the waters, and in the wide wilderness of shoreless depths, without companion or solace, was lost forever.

The family of the hunter, grateful for his generous help, adopted the bird as their family emblem or mark, and under the guardianship of the Crane that Crossed the River, they prospered, with days of plenty and nights of peace.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com