

The Enchanted Moccasins

Cornelius Mathews

Native Americannorth American

Intermediate
21 min read

A long, long time ago, a little boy was living with his sister entirely alone in an uninhabited country, far out in the north-west. He was called the Boy that carries the Ball on his Back, from an idea that he possessed supernatural powers. This boy was in the habit of meditating alone, and asking within himself, whether there were other beings similar to themselves on the earth.

When he grew up to manhood, he inquired of his sister whether she knew of any human beings beside themselves. She replied that she did; and that there was, at a great distance, a large village.

As soon as he heard this, he said to his sister, "I am now a young man and very much in want of a companion;" and he asked his sister to make him several pairs of moccasins.

She complied with his request; and as soon as he received the moccasins, he took up his war-club and set out in quest of the distant village.

He traveled on till he came to a small wigwam, and on looking into it he discovered a very old woman sitting alone by the fire. As soon as she saw the stranger, she invited him in, and thus addressed him:

“My poor grandchild, I suppose you are one of those who seek for the distant village, from which no person has ever yet returned. Unless your guardian is more powerful than the guardians of those who have gone before you, you will share a similar fate to theirs. Be careful to provide yourself with the invisible bones they use in the medicine-dance, for without these you can not succeed.”

After she had thus spoken, she gave him the following directions for his journey:

“When you come near to the village which you seek, you will see in the center a large lodge, in which the chief of the village, who has two daughters, resides. Before the door there is a great tree, which is smooth and without bark. On this tree, about the height of a man from the ground, is hung a small lodge, in which these two false daughters dwell. It is here that so many have been destroyed, and among them your two elder brothers. Be wise, my grandchild, and abide strictly by my directions.”

The old woman then gave to the young man the bones which were to secure his success; and she informed him with great care how he was to proceed.

Placing them in his bosom, Onwee Bahmondang, or the Wearer of the Ball, continued his journey, and kept eagerly on until he arrived at the village of which he was in search; and as he was gazing around him, he saw both the tree and the lodge which the old woman had mentioned.

He at once bent his steps for the tree, and approaching, he endeavored to reach the suspended lodge. But all his efforts were in vain; for as often as he attempted to reach it, the tree began to tremble, and it soon shot up so that the lodge could hardly be perceived.

He bethought him of his guardian, and invoking his aid, and changing himself into a squirrel, he mounted nimbly up again, in the hope that the lodge would not now escape him. Away shot the lodge, climb as briskly as he might.

Panting, and out of breath, he remembered the instructions of the old woman, and drawing from his bosom one of the bones, he thrust it into the trunk of the tree, and rested himself to be ready to start again.

As often as he wearied of climbing, for even a squirrel can not climb forever, he repeated the little ceremony of the bones; but whenever he came near the lodge and put forth his hand to touch it, the tree would shoot up as

before, and carry the lodge up far beyond his reach.

At length the bones being all gone, and the lodge well-nigh out of sight, he began to despair, for the earth, too, had long since vanished entirely from his view.

Summoning his whole heart, he resolved to try once more. On and up he went, and, as soon as he put forth his hand to touch it, the tree again shook, and away went the lodge.

One more endeavor, brave Onwee, and in he goes; for having now reached the arch of heaven, the fly-away lodge could go no higher.

Onwee entered the lodge with a fearless step, and he beheld the two wicked sisters sitting opposite each other. He asked their names. The one on his left hand called herself Azhabee, and the one on the right, Negahnabee.

After talking with them a little while, he discovered that whenever he addressed the one on his left hand, the tree would tremble as before and settle down to its former place; but when he addressed the one on his right hand, it would again shoot upward.

When he thus perceived that by addressing the one on his left hand that the tree would descend, he continued to do so until it had again settled down to its place near the earth. Then seizing his war-club, he said to the sisters:

“You who have caused the death of so many of my brethren I will now put an end to, and thus have revenge for those you have destroyed.”

As he spoke this he raised the club, and with one blow laid the two wicked women dead at his feet.

Onwee then descended, and learning that these sisters had a brother living with their father, who had shared all together in the spoils of all such as the wicked sisters had betrayed, and who would now pursue him for having put an end to their wicked profits, Onwee set off at random, not knowing whither he went.

The father coming in the evening to visit the lodge of his daughters, discovered what had happened. He immediately sent word to his son that his sisters had been slain, and that there were no more spoils to be had, which greatly inflamed the young man's temper, especially the woeful announcement at the close.

"The person who has done this," said the brother, as soon as he had reached the spot, chafing and half beside himself at the gloomy prospect of having no more travelers to strip, "must be that boy who carries the ball on his back. I know his mode of going about his business, and since he would not allow himself to be killed by my sisters, he shall have the honor of dying by my hand. I will pursue him and have revenge."

"It is well, my son," replied the father; "the spirit of your life grant you success. I counsel you to be wary in the pursuit. Bahmondang is a cunning youth. It is a strong spirit who has put him on to do this injury to us, and he will try to deceive you in every way. Above all, avoid tasting food till you succeed; for if you break your fast before you see his blood, your power will be destroyed."

The son took this fatherly advice all in good part, except that portion which enjoined upon him to abstain from staying his stomach; but over that he made a number of wry faces, for the brother of the two wicked sisters had, among numerous noble gifts, a very noble appetite. Nevertheless, he took up his weapons and departed in pursuit of Onwee Bahmondang, at the top of his speed.

Onwee finding that he was closely followed, climbed up into one of the tallest trees, and shot forth the magic arrows with which he had provided himself.

Seeing that his pursuer was not turned back by his arrows, Onwee renewed his flight; and when he found himself hard pressed, and his enemy close behind him, he transformed himself into the skeleton of a moose that had been killed, whose flesh had come off from his bones. He then remembered the moccasins which his sister had given him, and which were enchanted. Taking a pair of them, he placed them near the skeleton.

"Go," said he to them, "to the end of the earth."

The moccasins then left him, and their tracks remained.

The angry brother at length came to the skeleton of the moose, when he perceived that the track he had been long pursuing did not stop there, so he continued to follow it up till he arrived at the end of the earth, where,

for all his trouble, he found only a pair of moccasins.

Vexed that he had been outwitted by following a pair of moccasins instead of their owner, who was the object of his pursuit, he bitterly complained, resolving not to give up his revenge, and to be more wary in scrutinizing signs.

He then called to mind the skeleton he had met with on his way, and concluded that it must be the object of his search.

He retraced his steps toward the skeleton, but to his surprise it had disappeared, and the tracks of the wearer of the ball were in another direction. He now became faint with hunger, and lost heart; but when he remembered the blood of his sisters, and that he should not be allowed to enjoy a meal, nor so much as a mouthful, until he had put an end to Onwee Bahmondang, he plucked up his spirits and determined again to pursue.

Onwee, finding that he was closely followed, and that the hungry brother was approaching very fast, changed himself into a very old man, with two daughters, and living in a large lodge in the center of a beautiful garden, which was filled with every thing that could delight the eye, or was pleasant to the taste. He made himself appear so very old as to be unable to leave his lodge, and to require his daughters to bring him food and wait on him, as though he had been a mere child. The garden also had the appearance of old age, with its ancient bushes and hanging branches and decrepit vines loitering lazily about in the sun.

The brother kept on until he was nearly starved and ready to sink to the earth. He exclaimed, with a long-drawn and most mournful sigh, "Oh! I will forget the blood of my sisters, for I am starving. Oh! oh!"

But again he thought of the blood of his sisters, and what a fine appetite he would have if he should ever be allowed to eat any thing again, and once more he resolved to pursue, and to be content with nothing short of the amplest revenge.

He pushed on till he came to the beautiful garden. He advanced toward the lodge.

As soon as the fairy daughters perceived him they ran and told their father that a stranger approached.

Their father replied, "Invite him in, my children, invite him in."

They did so promptly, and, by the command of their father, they boiled some corn, and prepared several other palatable dishes. The savor was most delicious to the nostrils of the hungry brother, who had not the least suspicion of the sport that was going on at his expense.

He was faint and weary with travel, and he felt that he could endure fasting no longer; for his appetite was terribly inflamed by the sight of the choice food that was steaming before him.

He fell to and partook heartily of the meal; and, by so doing, he was overcome, and lost his right of revenge. All at once he forgot the blood of his sisters, and even the village of his nativity, and his father's lodge, and his whole past life. He ate so keenly, and came and went to the choice dishes so often, that drowsiness at length overpowered him, and he soon fell into a profound sleep.

Onwee Bahmondang watched his opportunity, and as soon as he saw that the false brother's sleep was sound, he resumed his youthful form, and sent off the two fairy daughters and the old garden; and drawing the magic-ball from his back, which turned out to be a great war-club, he fetched the slumbering brother a mighty blow, which sent him away too; and thus did Onwee Bahmondang vindicate his title as the Wearer of the Ball.

When Onwee swung around, with the great force and weight of the club with which he had dispatched the brother of the two wicked women, he found himself in a large village, surrounded by a great crowd of people. At the door of a beautiful lodge stood his sister, smiling, and ready to invite him in. Onwee entered, and hanging up his war-club and the enchanted moccasins, which he had recovered, he rested from his labors, and smoked his evening pipe, with the admiration and approval of the whole world.

With one exception only, Onwee Bahmondang had the hearty praises of all the people.

Now it happened that there lived in this same village an envious and boastful fellow, who had been once a chief, but coming home always badly whipped, he was put out of office, and now spent his time about the place mainly, in proclaiming certain great things which he had in his eye, and which he meant to do—one of these days.

This man's name was Ko-ko, the Owl; and hearing much of the wonderful achievements of the Wearer of the

Ball, Ko-ko put on a big look, and announced that he was going to do something extraordinary himself.

Onwee Bahmondang, he said, had not half done his work, and he, Ko-ko, meant to go on the ground and finish it up as it should be.

He began by procuring an oak ball, which he thrust down his back, and, confident in its magical powers, he, too, called himself the Wearer of the Ball. In fact it was the self-same ball that Onwee had employed, except that the magic had entirely gone out of it. Coming by night in the shadow of the lodge, he thrust his arm in at the door, and stealthily possessed himself of the enchanted moccasins. He would have taken away Onwee's war-club too, if he could have carried it; but although he was twice the size and girth of Onwee, he had not the strength to lift it; so he borrowed a club from an old chief, who was purblind, and mistook Ko-ko for his brother who was a brave man; and raising a terrible tumult with his voice, and a great dust with his heels, Ko-ko set out.

He had traveled all day, when he came to a small wigwam, and on looking into it, he discovered a very old woman sitting alone by the fire; just as Onwee had before.

This is the wigwam, said Ko-ko, and this is the old woman.

"What are you looking for?" asked the old woman.

"I want to find the lodge with the wicked young women in it, who slay travellers and steal their trappings," answered Ko-ko.

"You mean the two young women who lived in the flying lodge?" said the old woman.

"The same," answered Ko-ko. "I am going to kill them."

With this he gave a great flourish with his borrowed club, and looked desperate and murderous as he could.

"They were slain yesterday by the Wearer of the Ball," said the old woman.

Ko-ko looked around for the door in a very owlish way, and heaving a short hem from his chest, he acknowledged that he had heard something to that effect down in one of the villages.

“But there’s the brother. I’ll have a chance at him,” said Ko-ko.

“He is dead too,” said the old woman.

“Is there nobody then left for me to kill?” cried Ko-ko. “Must I then go back without any blood upon my hands?”

He made as if he could shed tears over his sad mishap.

“The father is still living; and you will find him in the lodge, if you have a mind to call on him. He would like to see the Owl,” the old woman added.

“He shall,” replied Ko-ko. “Have you any bones about the house; for I suppose I shall have to climb that tree.”

“Oh, yes; plenty,” answered the old woman. “You can have as many as you want.”

And she gave him a handful of fish-bones, which Ko-ko, taking them to be the Invisible Tallies which had helped Onwee Bahmondang in climbing the magical tree, thrust into his bosom.

“Thank you,” said Ko-ko; taking up his club and striding toward the door.

“Will you not have a little advice,” said the old woman. “This is a dangerous business you are going on.”

Ko-ko turned about and laughed to scorn the proposal, and putting forth his right foot from the lodge first, an observance in which he had great hopes, he started for the lodge of the wicked father.

Ko-ko ran very fast, as if he feared he should lose the chance of massacring any member of the wicked family, until he came in sight of the lodge hanging upon the tree.

He then slackened his pace, and crept forward with a wary eye lest somebody might chance to be looking out at the door. All was, however, still up there; and Ko-ko clasped the tree and began to climb.

Away went the lodge, and up went Ko-ko, puffing and panting, after it. And it was not a great while before the Owl had puffed and panted away all the wind he had to spare; and yet the lodge kept flying aloft, higher, higher. What was to be done!

Ko-ko of course bethought him of the bones, for that was just what, as he knew, had occurred to Onwee

Bahmondang under the like circumstances.

He had the bones in his bosom; and now it was necessary for him to be a squirrel. He immediately called on several guardian spirits whom he knew of by name, and requested them to convert him into a squirrel. But not one of all them seemed to pay the slightest attention to his request; for there he hung, the same heavy-limbed, big-headed, be-clubbed, and be-blanketed Ko-ko as ever.

He then desired that they would turn him into an opossum; an application which met with the same luck as the previous one. After this he petitioned to be a wolf, a gophir, a dog, or a bear—if they would be so obliging. The guardian spirits were either all deaf, or indifferent to his wishes, or absent on some other business.

Ko-ko, in spite of all his begging and supplication and beseeching, was obliged to be still Ko-ko.

“The bones, however,” he said, to himself, “are good. I shall get a nice rest, at any rate, if I am forced to climb as I am.”

With this he drew out one of the bones from his bosom, and shouting aloud, “Ho! ho! who is there?” he thrust it into the trunk of the tree, and would have indulged himself in a rest; but being no more than a common fish-bone, without the slightest savor of magic in it, it snapped with Ko-ko, who came tumbling down, with the door of the lodge which he had shaken loose, rattling after him.

“Ho! ho! who is there?” cried the wicked father, making his appearance at the opening and looking down.

“It is I, Onwee Bahmondang!” cried Ko-koor, thinking to frighten the wicked father.

“Ah! it is you, is it? I will be there presently,” called the old man. “Do not be in haste to go away!”

Ko-ko, observing that the old man was in earnest, scrambled up from the ground, and set off promptly at his highest rate of speed.

When he looked back and saw that the wicked father was gaining upon him, Ko-koor mounted a tree, as had Onwee Bahmondang before, and fired off a number of arrows, but as they were no more than common arrows, he got nothing by it, but was obliged to descend, and run again for life.

As he hurried on he encountered the skeleton of a moose, into which he would have transformed himself, but

not having the slightest confidence in any one of all the guardians who should have helped him, he passed on.

The wicked father was hot in pursuit, and Ko-koo was suffering terribly for lack of wind, when luckily he remembered the enchanted moccasins. He could not send them to the end of the earth, as had Onwee Bahmondang.

“I will improve on that dull fellow,” said Ko-ko. “I will put them on myself.”

Accordingly, Ko-ko had just time to draw on the moccasins when the wicked father came in sight.

“Go now!” cried Ko-ko, giving orders to the enchanted moccasins; and go they did; but to the astonishment of the Owl, they turned immediately about in the way in which the wicked father, now, very furious, was approaching.

“The other way! the other way!” cried Ko-ko.

Cry as loud as he would, the enchanted moccasins would keep on in their own course; and before he could shake himself out of them, they had run him directly into the face of the wicked father.

“What do you mean, you Owl?” cried the wicked father, falling upon Ko-ko with a huge club, and counting his ribs at every stroke.

“I can not help it, good man,” answered Ko-ko. “I tried my best—”

Ko-ko would have gone the other way, but the enchanted moccasins kept hurrying him forward. “Stand off, will you?” cried the old man.

By this time, allowing the wicked father chance to bestow no more than five-and-twenty more blows upon Ko-ko, the moccasins were taking him past.

“Stop!” cried the old man again. “You are running away. Ho! ho! you are a coward!”

“I am not, good man,” answered Ko-ko, carried away by the magical shoes, “I assure you.” But ere he could finish his avowal, the moccasins had hurried him out of sight.

“At any rate, I shall soon be home at this speed,” said Ko-koor to himself.

The moccasins seemed to know his thoughts; for just then they gave a sudden leap, slipped away from his feet, and left the Owl flat upon his back! while they glided home by themselves, to the lodge of Onwee Bahmondang, where they belonged.

A party of hunters passing that way after several days, found Ko-ko sitting among the bushes, looking greatly bewildered; and when they inquired of him how he had succeeded with the wicked father at the lodge, he answered that he had demolished the whole establishment, but that his name was not Ko-ko, but Onwee Bahmondang; saying which, he ran away into the woods, and was never seen more.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com