



The Fire-Plume

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Native AmericanNorth American

Intermediate
32 min read

Wassamo was living with his parents on the shore of a large bay, far out in the north-east.

One day, when the season had commenced for fish to be plenty, the mother of Wassamo said to him, “My son, I wish you would go to yonder point and see if you can not procure me some fish; and ask your cousin to accompany you.”

He did so. They set out, and in the course of the afternoon they arrived at the fishing-ground.

The cousin, being the elder, attended to the nets, and they encamped near by, using the bark of the birch for a lodge to shelter them through the night.

They lit a fire, and while they sat conversing with each other, the moon arose. Not a breath of wind disturbed the smooth surface of the lake. Not a cloud was seen. Wassamo looked out on the water toward their nets, and he saw that the little black spots, which were no other than the floats, dotting the lake, had disappeared.

“Cousin,” he said, “let us visit our nets; perhaps we are fortunate.”

When they drew up the nets they were rejoiced to see the meshes shining white, all over, with the glittering prey. They landed in fine spirits, and put away their canoe in safety from the winds.

“Wassamo,” said the cousin, “you cook that we may eat.”

Wassamo set about the work at once, and soon had his great kettle swung upon its branch, while the cousin lay at his ease upon the other side of the fire.

“Cousin,” said Wassamo, “tell me stories or sing me some love-songs.”

The cousin obeyed, and sung his plaintive songs; or he would frequently break off in the midst of a mournful chant, and begin to recite a mirthful story, and then in the midst of Wassamo’s laughter he would return to the plaintive ditty—just as it suited his fancy; for the cousin was gay of spirit, and shifted his humor faster than the fleecy clouds that appeared and disappeared in the night-sky over their heads. In this changeful pastime the cousin ran his length, and then he fell away, murmuring parts of his song or story, into a silvery sleep; with the moon gliding through the branches and gilding his face.

Wassamo in the mean while had lost the sound of his cousin’s voice in the rich simmer of the kettle; and when its music pleased his ear the most, as announcing that the fish were handsomely cooked, he lifted the kettle from the fire. He spoke to his cousin, but he received no answer.

He went on with his housekeeping alone, and took the wooden ladle and skimmed the kettle neatly, for the fish were very plump and fat. Wassamo had a torch of twisted bark in one hand to give light, and when he came to take out the fish, there was no one to have charge of the torch.

The cousin was so happy in his sleep, with the silver moon kissing his cheeks, as though she were enamored of his fair looks, that Wassamo had not the heart to call him up.

Binding his girdle upon his brow, in this he thrust the torch, and went forward, with the light dancing through the green leaves at every turn of his head, to prepare the evening meal.

He again spoke to his cousin, but gently, to learn whether he was in truth asleep. The cousin murmured, but made no reply; and Wassamo stepped softly about with the dancing fire-plume lighting up the gloom of the

forest at every turn he made.

Suddenly he heard a laugh It was double, or the one must be the perfect echo of the other. To Wassamo there appeared to be two persons at no great distance.

“Cousin,” said Wassamo, “some person is near us. I hear a laugh; awake and let us look out!”

The cousin made no answer.

Again Wassamo heard the laughter in mirthful repetition, like the ripple of the water-brook upon the shining pebbles of the stream. Peering out as far as the line of the torchlight pierced into the darkness, he beheld two beautiful young females smiling on him. Their countenances appeared to be perfectly white, like the fresh snow.

He crouched down and pushed his cousin, saying, in a low voice, “Awake! awake! here are two young women.”

But he received no answer. His cousin seemed lost to all earthly sense and sound; for he lay unmoved, smiling, in the calm light of the moon. Wassamo started up alone, and glided toward the strange females.

As he approached them he was more and more enraptured with their beauty; but just as he was about to speak to them, he suddenly fell to the earth, and they all three vanished together. The moon shone where they had just stood, but she saw them not. A gentle sound of music and soft voices accompanied their vanishing, and this wakened the cousin.

As he opened his eyes, in a dreamy way, he saw the kettle near him. Some of the fish he observed were in the bowl. The fire flickered, and made light and shadow; but nowhere was Wassamo to be seen. He waited, and waited again, in the expectation that Wassamo would appear.

“Perhaps,” thought the cousin, “he is gone out again to visit the nets.”

He looked off that way, but the canoe still lay close by the rock at the shore. He searched and found his footsteps in the ashes, and out upon the green ground a little distance, and then they were utterly lost.

He was now greatly troubled in spirit, and he called aloud, “Netawis! cousin! cousin!” but there was no answer to his call. He called again in his sorrow, louder and louder, “Netawis! Netawis! cousin! cousin! whither are you

gone?" But no answer came to his voice of wailing. He started for the edge of the woods, crying as he ran, "My cousin!" and "Oh, my cousin!"

Hither and thither through the forest he sped with all his fleetness of foot and quickness of spirit; and when at last he found that no voice would answer him, he burst into tears, and sobbed aloud.

He returned to the fire, and sat down. He mused upon the absence of Wassamo with a sorely-troubled heart. "He may have been playing me a trick," he thought; but it was full time that the trick should be at an end, and Wassamo returned not. The cousin cherished other hopes, but they all died away in the morning light, when he found himself alone by the hunting-fire.

"How shall I answer to his friends for Wassamo?" thought the cousin. "Although," he said to himself, "his parents are my kindred, and they are well assured that their son is my bosom-friend, will they receive that belief in the place of him who is lost. No, no; they will say that I have slain him, and they will require blood for blood. Oh! my cousin, whither are you gone?"

He would have rested to restore his mind to its peace, but he could not sleep; and, without further regard to net or canoe, he set off for the village, running all the way.

As they saw him approaching at such speed and alone, they said, "Some accident has happened."

When he had come into the village, he told them how Wassamo had disappeared. He stated all the circumstances. He kept nothing to himself. He declared all that he knew.

Some said, "He has killed him in the dark." Others said, "It is impossible; they were like brothers; they would have fallen for each other. It can not be."

At the cousin's request, many of the men visited the fish-fire. There were no marks of blood. No hasty steps were there to show that any conflict or struggle had occurred. Every leaf on every tree was in its place; and they saw, as the cousin had before, that the foot-prints of Wassamo stopped in the wood, as if he had gone no further upon the earth, but had ascended into the air.

They returned to the village, and no man was the wiser as to the strange and sudden vanishing of Wassamo. None ever looked to see him more; only the parents, who still hoped and awaited his return.

The spring, with all its blossoms and its delicate newness of life, came among them; the Indians assembled to celebrate their vernal feast from all the country round.

Among them came the sad cousin of Wassamo. He was pale and thin as the shadow of the shaft that flies. The pain of his mind had changed his features, and wherever he turned his eyes, they were dazzled with the sight of the red blood of his friend.

The parents of Wassamo, far gone in despair, and weary with watching for his return, now demanded the life of Netawis. The village was stirred to its very heart by their loud lamentings; and, after a struggle of pity, they decided to give the young man's life to the parents. They said that they had waited long enough. A day was appointed on which the cousin was to yield his life for his friend's.

He was a brave youth, and they bound him only by his word to be ready at the appointed hour. He said that he was not afraid to die; for he was innocent of the great wrong they laid to his charge.

A day or two before the time set to take his life, he wandered sadly along the shore of the lake. He looked at the glassy water, and more than once the thought to end his griefs by casting himself in its depths, came upon him with such sudden force that it was only by severe self-control that he was able to turn his steps in another direction. He reflected—"They will say that I was guilty if I take my own life. No. I will give them my blood for that of my cousin."

He walked on, with slow steps, but he found no comfort, turn where he would; the sweet songs of the grove jarred upon his ear; the beauty of the blue sky pained his sight; and the soft green earth, as he trode upon it, seemed harsh to his foot, and sent a pang through every nerve. "Oh, where is my cousin?" he kept saying to himself.

Meanwhile, when Wassamo fell senseless before the two young women in the wood, he lost all knowledge of himself until he wakened in a distant scene. He heard persons conversing. One spoke in a tone of command, saying, "You foolish girls, is this the way that you rove about at nights without our knowledge? Put that person

you have brought on that couch of yours, and do not let him lie upon the ground.”

Wassamo felt himself moved, he knew not how, and placed upon a couch. Some time after, the spell seemed to be a little lightened, and on opening his eyes, he was surprised to find that he was lying in a spacious and shining lodge, extending as far as the eye could reach.

One spoke to him and said: “Stranger, awake, and take something wherewith to refresh yourself.”

He obeyed the command and sat up. On either side of the lodge he beheld rows of people seated in orderly array. At a distance he could see two stately persons, who looked rather more in years than the others, and who appeared to exact obedience from all around them. One of them, whom he heard addressed as the Old Spirit-man, spoke to Wassamo. “My son,” said he, “know it was those foolish girls who brought you hither. They saw you at the fishing-ground. When you attempted to approach them you fell senseless, and at the same moment they transported you to this place. We are under the earth. But be at ease. We will make your stay with us pleasant. I am the guardian Spirit of the Sand Mountains. They are my charge. I pile them up, and blow them about, and do whatever I will with them. It keeps me very busy, but I am hale for my age, and I love to be employed. I have often wished to get one of your race to marry among us. If you can make up your mind to remain, I will give you one of my daughters—the one who smiled on you first, the night you were brought away from your parents and friends.”

Wassamo dropped his head and made no answer. The thought that he should behold his kindred no more, made him sad.

He was silent, and the Old Spirit continued: “Your wants will all be supplied; but you must be careful not to stray far from the lodge. I am afraid of that Spirit who rules all islands lying in the lakes. He is my bitter enemy, for I have refused him my daughter in marriage; and when he learns that you are a member of my family, he will seek to harm you. There is my daughter,” added the Old Spirit, pointing toward her. “Take her. She shall be your wife.”

Forthwith Wassamo and the Old Spirit’s daughter sat near each other in the lodge, and they were man and wife.

One evening the Old Spirit came in after a busy day’s work out among the sand-hills, in the course of which he

had blown them all out of shape with great gusts of wind, and strewn them about in a thousand directions, and brought them back and piled them up in all sorts of misshapen heaps.

At the close of this busy day, when the Old Spirit came in very much out of breath, he said to Wassamo, "Son-in-law, I am in want of tobacco. None grows about this dry place of mine. You shall return to your people and procure me a supply. It is seldom that the few who pass these sand-hills offer me a piece of tobacco,—it is a rare plant in these parts,—but when they do, it immediately comes to me. Just so," he added, putting his hand out of the side of the lodge and drawing in several pieces of tobacco which some one passing at that moment offered as a fee to the Old Spirit, to keep the sand-hills from blowing about till they had got by.

Other gifts beside tobacco came in the same way to the side of the lodge—sometimes a whole bear, then a wampum-robe, then a string of birds—and the Sand-Spirits altogether led an easy life; for they were not at the trouble to hunt or clothe themselves; and whenever the housekeeping began to fall short, nothing would happen but a wonderful storm of dust, all the sand-hills being straightway put in an uproar, and the contributions would at once begin to pour in at the side windows of the lodge, till all their wants were supplied.

After Wassamo had been among these curious people several months, the old Sand-Spirit said to him, "Son-in-law, you must not be surprised at what you will see next; for since you have been with us you have never known us to go to sleep. It has been summer when the sun never sets here where we live. But now, what you call winter, is coming on. You will soon see us lie down, and we shall not rise again till the spring. Take my advice. Do not leave the lodge. I have sure knowledge that that knavish Island Spirit is on the prowl, and as he has command of a particular kind of storm, which comes from the south-west, he only waits his opportunity to catch you abroad and do you a mischief. Try and amuse yourself. That cupboard," pointing to a corner of the lodge, "is never empty; for it is there that all the offerings are handed in while we are asleep. It is never empty, and—" But ere the old Sand-Spirit could utter another word, a loud rattling of thunder was heard, and instantly, not only the Old Spirit but every one of his family, vanished out of sight.

When the storm had passed by, they all reappeared in the lodge. This sudden vanishing and reappearance occurred at every tempest.

"You are surprised," said the Old Spirit, "to see us disappear when it thunders. The reason is this: that noise which you fancy is thunder, is our enemy the Island Spirit hallooing on his way home from the hunt. We get

out of sight that we may escape the necessity of asking him to come in and share our evening meal. We are not afraid of him, not in the least.”

Just then it chanced to thunder again, and Wassamo observed that his father-in-law made extraordinary dispatch to conceal himself, although no stranger, at all resembling in any way the Island Spirit, was in view.

Shortly after this the season of sleep began, and one by one they laid themselves down to the long slumber.

The Old Spirit was the last to drop away; and, before he yielded, he went forth and had his last sport with the sand-hills, and he so tossed and vexed the poor hills, and scattered them to and fro, and whirled them up in the air, and far over the land, that it was days and days before they got back to any thing like their natural shape.

While his relations were enjoying this long sleep, Wassamo amused himself as best he could. The cupboard never failed him once: for visit it when he would, he always found a fresh supply of game, and every other dainty which his heart desired.

But his chief pastime was to listen to the voices of the travelers who passed by the window at the side of the lodge where they made their requests for comfortable weather and an easy journey.

These were often mingled with loud complainings, such as “Ho! how the sand jumps about!” “Take away that hill!” “I am lost!” “Old Sand-Spirit, where are you? help this way!” and the like, which indicated that such as were journeying through the hills had their own troubles to encounter.

As the spring-light of the first day of spring shone into the lodge, the whole family arose and went about the affairs of the day as though they had been slumbering only for a single night. The rest of the Old Spirit seemed to have done him much good, for he was very cheerful; and, first putting his head forth from the window for a puff at a sand-hill, which was his prime luxury in a morning, he said to Wassamo, “Son-in-law, you have been very patient with our long absence from your company, and you shall be rewarded. In a few days you may start with your wife to visit your relations. You can be absent one year, but at the end of that time you must return. When you get to your home-village, you must first go in alone. Leave your wife at a short distance from the lodge, and when you are welcome, then send for her. When there, do not be surprised that she disappears whenever you hear it thunder.” He added, with a sly look, “That old Island Spirit has a brother down in that part of the country. You will prosper in all things, for my daughter is very diligent. All the time that you pass in

sleep, she will be at work. The distance is short to your village. A path leads directly to it, and when you get there, do not forget my wants as I stated to you before.”

Wassamo promised obedience to these directions, and, at the appointed time, set out in company with his wife. They traveled on a pleasant course, his wife leading the way, until they reached a rising ground.

At the highest point of this ground, she said, “We will soon get to your country.”

It suddenly became broad day, as they came upon a high bank; they passed, unwet, for a short distance under the lake, and presently emerged from the water at the sand-banks, just off the shore where Wassamo had set his nets on the night when he had been borne away by the two strange females.

He now left his wife sheltered in a neighboring wood, while he advanced toward the village alone.

Musing sadly, and from time to time breaking forth in mournful cries, as he walked the shore, it was his cousin that Wassamo beheld as he turned the first point of land by the lake.

With the speed of lightning the cousin rushed forward. “Netawis! Netawis!” he cried, “is it indeed you? Whence have you come, oh, my cousin?”

They fell upon each other’s necks, and wept aloud. And then, without further delay or question, the cousin ran off with breathless dispatch to the village. He seemed like a shadow upon the open ground, he sped so fast.

He entered the lodge where sat the mother of Wassamo in mourning for her son. “Hear me,” said the cousin. “I have seen him whom you accuse me of having killed. He will be here even while we speak.”

He had scarcely uttered these words when the whole village was astir in an instant. All ran out and strained their eyes to catch the first view of him whom they had thought dead. And when Wassamo came forward, they at first fell from him as though he had been in truth one returned from the Spirit-land. He entered the lodge of his parents. They saw that it was Wassamo, living, breathing and as they had ever known him. And joy lit up the lodge-circle as though a new fire had been kindled in the eyes of his friends and kinsfolk.

He related all that had happened to him from the moment of his leaving the temporary night-lodge with the flame on his head. He told them of the strange land in which he had sojourned during his absence. He added to

his mother, apart from the company, that he was married, and that he had left his wife at a short distance from the village.

She went out immediately in search of her; they soon found her in the wood, and all the women in the village conducted her in honor to the lodge of her new relations. The Indian people were astonished at her beauty, at the whiteness of her skin, and still more, that she was able to talk with them in their own language.

The village was happy, and the feast went on as long as the supply held out. All were delighted to make the acquaintance of the old Sand-Spirit's daughter; and as they had heard that he was a magician and guardian of great power, the tobacco which he had sent for by his son-in-law, came in, in great abundance, with every visitor.

The summer and fall which Wassamo thus passed with his parents and the people of his tribe were prosperous with all the country.

The cousin of Wassamo recovered heart, and sang once more his sad or mirthful chants, just as the humor was upon him; but he kept close by Wassamo, and watched him in all his movements. He made it a point to ask many questions of the country he came from; some of which his cousin replied to, but others were left entirely in the dark.

At every thunder-storm, as the old Sand-Spirit had foreboded, the wife of Wassamo disappeared, much to the astonishment of her Indian company, and, to their greater wonder, she was never idle, night nor day.

When the winter came on, Wassamo prepared for her a comfortable lodge, to which she withdrew for her long sleep; and he gave notice to his friends that they must not disturb her, as she would not be with them again until the spring returned.

Before lying down, she said to her husband, "No one but yourself must pass on this side of the lodge."

The winter passed away with snows, and sports and stones in the lodge; and when the sap of the maple began to flow, the wife of Wassamo wakened, and she immediately set about work as before. She helped at the maple-trees with the others; and, as if luck were in her presence, the sugar-harvest was greater than had been ever known in all that region.

The gifts of tobacco, after this, came in even more freely than they had at first; and as each brought his bundle to the lodge of Wassamo, he asked for the usual length of life, for success as a hunter, and for a plentiful supply of food. They particularly desired that the sand-hills might be kept quiet, so that their lands might be moist, and their eyes clear of dust to sight the game.

Wassamo replied that he would mention each of their requests to his father-in-law.

The tobacco was stored in sacks, and on the outside of the skins, that there might be no mistake as to their wants, each one who had given tobacco had painted and marked in distinct characters the totem or family emblem of his family and tribe. These the old Sand-Spirit could read at his leisure, and do what he thought best for each of his various petitioners.

When the time for his return arrived, Wassamo warned his people that they should not follow him nor attempt to take note how he disappeared. He then took the moose-skin sacks filled with tobacco, and bade farewell to all but Netawis. He insisted on the privilege of attending Wassamo and his wife for a distance, and when they reached the sand-banks he expressed the strongest wish to proceed with them on their journey. Wassamo told him that it could not be; that only spirits could exert the necessary power, and that there were no such spirits at hand.

They then took an affectionate leave of each other, Wassamo enjoining it upon his cousin, at risk of his life, to not look back when he had once started to return.

The cousin, sore at heart, but constrained to obey, parted from them, and as he walked sadly away, he heard a gliding noise as of the sound of waters that were cleaved.

He returned home, and told his friends that Wassamo and his wife had disappeared, but that he knew not how. No one doubted his word in any thing now.

Wassamo with his wife soon reached their home at the hills. The old Sand-Spirit was in excellent health, and delighted to see them. He hailed their return with open arms; and he opened his arms so very wide, that when he closed them he not only embraced Wassamo and his wife, but all of the tobacco-sacks which they had brought with them.

The requests of the Indian people were made known to him; he replied that he would attend to all, but that he must first invite his friends to smoke with him. Accordingly he at once dispatched his pipe-bearer and confidential aid to summon various Spirits of his acquaintance, and set the time for them to come.

Meanwhile he had a word of advice for his son-in-law Wassamo. "My son," said he, "some of these Manitoes that I have asked to come here are of a very wicked temper, and I warn you especially of that Island Spirit who wished to marry my daughter. He is a very bad-hearted Monedo, and would like to do you harm. Some of the company you will, however, find to be very friendly. A caution for you. When they come in, do you sit close by your wife; if you do not, you will be lost. She only can save you; for those who are expected to come are so powerful that they will otherwise draw you from your seat, and toss you out of the lodge as though you were a feather. You have only to observe my words and all will be well."

Wassamo took heed to what the Old Spirit said, and answered that he would obey.

About mid-day the company began to assemble; and such a company Wassamo had never looked on before. There were Spirits from all parts of the country; such strange-looking persons, and in dresses so wild and outlandish! One entered who smiled on him. This, Wassamo was informed, was a Spirit who had charge of the affairs of a tribe in the North, and he was as pleasant and cheery a Spirit as one would wish to see. Soon after, Wassamo heard a great rumbling and roaring, as of waters tumbling over rocks; and presently, with a vast bluster, and fairly shaking the lodge with his deep-throated hail of welcome to the old Sand-Spirit, in rolled another, who was the Guardian Spirit and special director of a great cataract or water-fall not far off.

Then came with crashing steps the owner of several whirlwinds, which were in the habit of raging about in the neighboring country. And following this one, glided in a sweet-spoken, gentle-faced little Spirit, who was

understood to represent a summer-gale that was accustomed to blow, toward evening, in at the lodge-doors, and to be particularly well disposed toward young lovers.

The last to appear was a great rocky-headed fellow; and he was twice as stony in his manners; and swaggered and strided in, and raised such a commotion with his great green blanket when he shook it, that Wassamo was nearly taken off his feet; and it was only by main force that he was able to cling by his wife. This, which was the last to enter, was that wicked Island Spirit, who looked grim enough at Wassamo's wife, who had rejected him, as he passed in.

Soon after, the old Sand-Spirit, who was a great speech-maker, arose and addressed the assembly.

"Brothers," he said, "I have invited you to partake with me of the offerings made by the mortals on earth, which have been brought by our relation," pointing to Wassamo. "Brothers, you see their wishes and desires plainly set forth here," laying his hand upon the figured moose-skins. "The offering is worthy of our consideration. Brothers, I see nothing on my part to hinder our granting their requests; they do not appear to be unreasonable. Brothers, the offer is gratifying. It is tobacco—an article which we have lacked until we scarcely knew how to use our pipes. Shall we grant their requests? One thing more I would say. Brothers, it is this: There is my son-in-law; he is mortal. I wish to detain him with me, and it is with us jointly to make him one of us."

"Hoke! hoke!" ran through the whole company of Spirits, and "Hoke! hoke!" they cried again. And it was understood that the petitioners were to have all they asked, and that Wassamo was thenceforward fairly accepted as a member of the great family of Spirits.

As a wedding-gift, the Old Spirit asked his son-in-law to make one request, which should be promptly granted.

"Let there be no sand-squalls among my father's people for three months to come," said Wassamo.

"So shall it be," answered the old Sand-Spirit.

The tobacco was now divided in equal shares among the company. They filled their pipes—and huge pipes they were—and such clouds they blew, that they rushed forth out of the lodge and brought on night, in all the country round about, several hours before its time.

After a while passed in silence, the Spirits rose up, and bearing off their tobacco-sacks, they went smoking through the country, and losing themselves in their own fog, till a late hour in the morning, when all of their pipes being burned out, each departed on his own business.

The very next day the old Sand-Spirit, who was very much pleased with the turn affairs had taken at his entertainment, addressed Wassamo: “Son-in-law, I have made up my mind to allow you another holiday as an acknowledgment of the handsome manner in which you acquitted yourself of your embassy. You may visit your parents and relatives once more, to tell them that their wishes are granted, and to take your leave of them forever. You can never, after, visit them again.”

Wassamo at once set out, reached his people, and was heartily welcomed.

They asked for his wife, and Wassamo informed them that she had tarried at home to look after a son, a fine little Sand-Spirit, who had been born to them since his return.

Having delivered all of his messages and passed a happy time, Wassamo said, “I must now bid you all farewell forever.”

His parents and friends raised their voices in loud lamentation; they clung to him, and as a special favor, which he could now grant, being himself a spirit, he allowed them to accompany him to the sand-banks.

They all seated themselves to watch his last farewell. The day was mild; the sky clear, not a cloud appearing to dim the heavens, nor a breath of wind to ruffle the tranquil waters. A perfect silence fell upon the company. They gazed with eager eyes fastened on Wassamo, as he waded out into the water, waving his hands. They saw him descend, more and more, into the depths. They beheld the waves close over his head, and a loud and piercing wail went up which rent the sky.

They looked again; a red flame, as if the sun had glanced on a billow, lighted the spot for an instant; but the Feather of Flames, Wassamo of the Fire-Plume, had disappeared from home and kindred, and the familiar

paths of his youth, forever.

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