

KNOCK ON OUR DOOR

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The Story of the Totem Pole

In Krape Park*

Carved by Chief Wha-kadim (William Shelton) of the Snohomish Indians and presented to the boy scouts of the U.S. Grant Area in 1935 by Mr. and Mrs. Robert F. Koenig.

In carving the images Chief Wha-Kadim merely put in visible form the life lessons told him, when a little boy, in the form of parables or stories, by his father and mother. Fortunately he has put these stories in writing, which we reproduce here, somewhat condensed.

It may help our appreciation of them to know that a totem is not a figure carved in wood – such a figure is a mere symbol – but a totem is a spiritual being, which is believed to take the form of a plant or, more frequently, of an animal. Among the American Indians, a totem is a guardian spirit, sometimes of an individual, but more commonly of a family or tribe.

The American Indians are not the only totem worshipers. Every primitive people, when they have reached and advanced stage of development, have had their totems. The animal-headed gods of the early Egyptians, pictured today on the costly tapestries

**(Condensed by William T. Hewetson from the book “The Story of the Totem Pole or Indian Legends” by Chief William Shelton and revised by the editors.)*

sold in oriental bazaars, were their totems. So too the dragon, which plays such a prominent part in the art of China and Japan, is related to the totems of those nations.

Longfellow, in his Hiawatha, has shown that the folklore of the Indians centers around the stories connected with their totems. They are, indeed, an Indian mythology. As we read the stories of Chief Wha-kadim which follow, we get a glimpse into the deepest mysteries of the life of his people. The first story has to do with the figure of the whale on the totem pole in Krape park, and here it is:

The Whale, the Mink and Tut-te-eka

One day the mink and his little brother, Tut-te-eka, went out fishing in a canoe, with a spear. While they were fishing a big whale came along and made the water go up and down. This made the mink angry and he called the whale “dirty thing” and “full of hot air”, and other bad names.

Presently the whale heard and decided to teach the mink a lesson. So, coming close, he swallowed the mink, his brother and the canoe.

Now, Tut-te-eka was a smart boy, even if he could not boss his big brother, and after a while he said: “I have heard that when a whale dies he always goes to a creek. Let us feel around for the whale’s heart, kill him, and when he goes to the creek to die, we may have a chance to get out.”

After a long search they found the heart and Tut-te-eka began cutting at it with his flint knife. This made the whale very sick and after a while he swam to a creek, where he died. Then the mink began hollering and making a loud noise inside the whale’s stomach. He wanted someone to come and let them out.

An old man was making a canoe near the stream. Hearing a strange noise, he looked up and, to his surprise, saw the dead whale. Coming up to it, he again heard the strange sounds, and as he listened, he heard someone inside the whale's stomach say, "This is the thinnest place." Then the old man chopped a hole in the whale's side with his hatchet, and out came the mink and his little brother.

Then the mink, instead of being grateful to his little brother, who had proved to be so much smarter than he, and had really saved his life, began making fun of him. "Look," he said, "your eyebrows are all peeled off." But Tut-te-eka answered him back, "You aren't any better off. Feel your head, the hair is all gone."

That was too much for the mink and he was ready to go home. The old man pointed out the way, and they were soon back with their parents.

The lesson part of the story is this: That you should not get mixed up with bad people, even though they are your brothers. Tut-te-eka was truthful, kind and good, but was swallowed by the whale because of his foolish, boasting brother.

It took the genius of Longfellow to see in the folk lessons of the American Indians the human interest and dramatic power which are the essence of a good story. Yet even the tales of Hiawatha, fine as they are, lack the simplicity and naturalness of the originals upon which they are based. Many of the Indian stories were handed down from father to son and from mother to daughter, and no doubt many improvements in them were made as they were transmitted.

As they were intended to teach the way of life to children, they have a distinct moral tone. In fact, they were based on the principle that good stories make good boys and girls, and bad stories make bad boys and girls – a principle regarded by too many modern storytellers as an "old fogy" notion.

The Little Man With the Bright Colored Coat

Once there was a family living where there were no other people. They were a very nice family and they had a daughter they thought a great deal of. One day a man came along and asked to marry the daughter. He was a nice enough looking young man, but he was not a high-class Indian and so they refused him.

“It would be a shame,” they said, “for our daughter to marry into a low-class family.”

But the girl loved the young man and married him, anyway. Then the parents were ashamed of her and moved away to another place, leaving the young married couple to live in the old place. This young man, he was really not much of a man. They had nothing to eat and were very poor.

After a while a son was born to them - a fine baby, and he grew very fast and soon became a smart little man. He made a bow and arrow for himself and practiced shooting. Soon he began bringing home birds with fine feathers, and one day he asked his mother to take the skins with the bright feathers on and make him a coat, and she did. Then he asked her to make a bag out of coon skin, and she made the bag, and he called it Chlh-lohoh, and he carried his arrows in it. And he became a great shooter with the bow and arrow. He could kill anything. He was a very smart boy.

And, when his parents saw what a smart boy he was, they became much ashamed that he had such poor parents, and so they decided to get rid of themselves. In the morning when the boy was about to start out, the mother said to him: “My son, your grandfather moved away and left me here. If you should every look for him, his name is Bic-bic-way-ah. Just mention it and people will know who you mean.”

That evening the boy came home lugging a big elk he had killed. He looked all around for his father and mother. He wanted to show them the big elk he had slain with his bow and arrow. But he could not find them. After a time he found a huge heap of ashes and, poking around in the ashes, he found the bones of his parents. They had burned themselves to death, in order that they might not disgrace their son who was so much better than they were.

Then the boy remembered what his mother had told him and went off to look for his grandfather. Everyone he saw admired his fine coat of feathers and liked the boy, because he was so well-built and so smart. And one old man tried to claim him for his grandson. But the boy was too smart and he said to himself: “I don’t like him. He makes too much noise.”

After a long time he found his real grandfather and liked him, for he was a nice old man, and the boy was very happy. He went out hunting with the old man’s two sons, his uncles, and killed more game than both of them put together. He was the best hunter in all the country, and everybody praised him.

The lesson part of this story is this: When it was told to children, they naturally wanted to be like this boy, who started with nothing, learned to shoot all by himself – did everything of his own will – and so became a great man.

The Black Bear and the Grizzly Bear

We regret that space will permit us to give only a bare outline of this interesting story, which centers around the figure of the bears on the totem pole.

According to Chief Wha-kadim’s story, a brown bear and her two children lived with a grizzly bear and her two children. The

big strong grizzly bear was always picking on the smaller brown bear. After this had gone on quite a while, the brown bear became convinced that the grizzly bear intended to kill her. She therefore called her two children to her and told them just what to do if the grizzly bear should kill her. When the sky grew red in the west, she told them, they would know she had been killed. Then they were to lie in wait for the young grizzly bears and kill them. After that they were to take some grease, a bow and arrows, a spear, an echo and a handful of nice weather, and start for the home of their grandfather, who was very wise and would save them from the grizzly bear who would certainly follow them.

The grease, they poured on an old log, over which the grizzly bear slipped and fell, thus delaying her. The arrows, they paid to a little trail, who led the grizzly off the main trail, causing her to lose time. The bow they gave to a crab apple bush, which caught the grizzly's hair and held her a while. The echo led her away from the path among the hills and a crane to whom they gave the spear put one leg across a river and let them pass over on it: but when the grizzly came, the crane let him slip off into the river, and this delayed the grizzly some more. The little bears finally reached their grandfather and were saved.

The moral of this story, as you probably have guessed, is that "if children follow the advice of their mothers, no harm will come to them."

Hoh-Kwy, the Little Diver

In a certain village lived Mr. Crane and his bride, the little diver, Hoh-Kwy. The Little diver was a good wife and the crane a fine husband, and for a time they lived very happily together. The crane was a skillful fisherman and he brought the diver the choicest bits of fish.

One day the diver pretended to be very sick and the crane went out to get her some good nourishing food – something she was very fond of. For days he did this and yet his wife did not seem to improve. One day he came home unexpectedly and found that his wife, instead of being sick as she pretended, was carrying on a flirtation with a woodpecker.

The crane was so furious that he immediately stabbed the woodpecker to death. If you will notice you can still see the bloodstained feathers on the woodpecker's side.

Then the crane decided to punish his wife. He flew with her to the top of a tall cedar tree and tied her there with a rope. The little diver struggled so hard to free herself that she bled and if you look you can see a red streak down the tree, left by her blood.

The diver's parents offered a reward to anyone who should release her. Several tried but only succeeded in getting beyond the center of the tree. All the rest fell and perished. The one who did get higher failed to reach the diver but had to turn back. And when he reached the ground, he could not stand upright but had to crawl like a snake.

Then a woodpecker offered to release the diver. He flew up to the top and untied the rope. The diver was saved and all the people were so glad that they gave the woodpecker all their property and they were all very poor for the rest of their lives.

The moral is that when we do wrong we not only suffer ourselves but make others suffer also.

The next story has to do with the figure of the Deer and the Wolves. It is too long to give more than a mere summary.

The Deer and the Wolves

The deer family is known as fleet of foot, but not very smart. The wolf family is both smart and tricky. One day the wolves were playing a game called Shaw-uts, and the deer decided to join them. They thought they could ply the wolves' game just as well as the wolves themselves. And the wolves were smart enough to let them think so.

When it was too late the deer found they were no match for the wolves in their game. It was the rabbit that told them what the wolves were up to. But before they could get out of it and away, the wolves set on them and killed them all.

The moral of this story is that unless you are sure you are smarter than another, you had better not play his own game with him, for you are sure to get the worst of it.

Sway-Uock

Sway-Uock is the ugly old woman on the totem pole. She was not only ugly but very cruel. One day she visited a village where a band of Indians lived, and she caught all the children she could find, put them in a big basket she was carrying, and took them home.

When she got home, she built a huge fire and cooked and ate the children. It wasn't long until she was hungry again and so she made a second visit to the Indian village, and again caught all the children she could find and carried them off to her home in the forest.

It happened that among this second group of children was a little hunchbacked boy, who was smarter than the other children. As the old witch put the children, one after another, into her basket, he kept climbing to the top of the heap. As the old woman went through the woods, she passed under a tree with a low-hanging limb. The little hunchback, who was watching for this very thing to happen, reached up and caught hold of the limb and pulled himself free of the basket. Then he watched to see what the old woman would do with the children. When he saw her build a fire, cook and eat them, he ran home as fast as he could and told the Indians. Of course they were all very sad but they did not know what to do.

After a time old Sway-Uock made a third visit to the village. This time she filled her basket with little girls. As she walked through the woods, the girls discussed what they would do to save themselves. At last they hit upon a plan. When the old woman started her fire and was dancing about it until it should get hot enough, they waited till her back was to them, and then they all rushed at her together and threw themselves against her, and their combined weight was so great that the ugly old woman tumbled into her own fire and was burned to death.

Of course, the lesson of this story is that “united we stand, divided we fall”. Even women, if they will combine, can accomplish wonders.

The Eagle Brothers and the Mink

This is our last story, and it is similar to that of the Deer and the Wolves. There were two eagle brothers who were very strong and quick. The mink, who was neither strong nor quick, always made believe that he was other than he was. As a matter of fact, he was a mischief-maker and a liar.

The eagles had a beautiful sister and the mink wanted to marry her. So he pretended to her and to her brothers that he was a great man, and he was such a successful liar, he made them believe it. As a result, the sister and the mink were married.

The eagles were fond of play and their play was pretty rough. They invited the mink to join them. His wife, who had found out he wasn't what he pretended to be, advised him not to play with her brothers. But the mink said, "I can get around so they cannot catch me."

Before the mink knew it, he was badly wounded and almost dead. The eagle brothers were very sorry and they and their sister doctored him and nursed him back to health. But they had discovered that he was an impostor, so when he got well, they drove him away. and he went back to his own people.

The lesson is very much like that in the story of the Deer and the Wolves. We should not get into something we know nothing about.

This interesting landmark at Krape Park was purchased from the carver, a chief of the Snohomish Indians named Wha-kadim (William Shelton), and shipped in a special freight car direct to Freeport. Each figure on this pole symbolizes a special legendary story of the Snohomish Indians. The picture of this totem pole is included here because of the Indian art and the rarity of totem poles in the East and Central West. Most of them are found in the Northwest and Alaska. Their symbolism is an interesting study.