

# THE PASSING OF KEENOOSH-AW OGEEMAH

By Marstyn Pollough-Pogue

"No life so happy and so pleasant, as the life of a well-governed angler."—*Izaak Walton.*

UNDER the water, in the dim, umbergreen deeps among the looming weeds, he was king, and no man can tell how long he governed as monarchs seldom dare to rule, and cheerfully ate his subjects when he felt within him the stirrings of appetite, which was often, before he gave up the ghost that spring evening, fighting hard, as it is meet and fitting that kings and over-lords ever should die. Probably he was fifty or sixty years old.

He was captured in the second week of May, Waw-beegoon-keesheesh, the Moon of Flowers, as the Mississaugas say, when the madder-red wake robins, the snow-white Indian paints, and the yellow trout lilies wore opening in the Ontario woods, and the yelling wild geese were still steering north in dipping strings and swaying, spreading V formations, beautiful and swift.

The whirligig of time has made many gyrations; many seasons have run their length and gone away into the dim width of the past since that splendid evening of the northern spring-time when the gamy old fish turned his belly upward to flash back the rays of the dipping sun. The men who caught him are not sure whether he was a pike or a muskallonge; they did not observe whether he was marked with dark spots on a light background, or light blotches on a dark background, or whether he was spotted at all or not. And they did not notice the scales on his cheeks and gill-covers. But they knew he was a water-wolf, ravening and terrible. He was long and lithe, with vicious-looking jaws and staring, menacing, long-focus eyes. He was plated with pearl and copper and olive-green scales. His head was lacquered brown-green and cinnamon; his belly was milk-white, tinged with faintest pink and tenderest yellow. The structural spines of his wing-like fins and fan-like tail were crystalline and transparent. He was a beautiful shark. Keenoosh-aw is the name-word of his kind, in the O-jeeb-way language, the speech of the Mississauga In-

dians, who troll all day nearly every day in the summer and catch fish of his tribe, and of the tribe of Maun-ashsheegawn, the black bass, mostly.

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On a map of Ontario you can find the seven northern townships of Peterborough county with the tip of your forefinger if the map is a good one. The blue blotches which stand for lakes are as thick on the yellow background of the map as emerald clots of lichen on the gray laurentian rock. Also the map is veined like your forearm with sinuous tracings of creeks and little rivers running wild. Apparently God Almighty made these lakes and streams by pouring water into troughs and saucers and bowls and gashes in the gray and gray-green and rust-red gneiss rock and the milk-white silurian limestone, and the widest and longest and deepest of those holes is the tremendous trough that contains the pure, cold snow-water of Stony Lake. It was among the islands in this lake—there are nine hundred of them, lumps of granite, with red pines, white spruces, and red and white cedars upon them—that the Ogeemah Keenoosh-aw (ogeemah means king), fought his last brave fight.

Near to the eastern end of Stony Lake and looking down over it, several hills locally called the Blue Mountains—though they are neither any gradation or tone of blue nor any kind of mountains, but only sprawling, long-flanked, round-shouldered hills—stand up in the hard glare of the sun all day and loom dimly in the blue twilight. Between the western roots of the Blue Mountains and the eastern end of Stony Lake you will observe on the map an outlined blotch like the O-jeeb-way Indian picture-symbol representative of the snake totem. This blotch which is narrow and long is not as long as the name of the lake it stands for, which in the smallest available type extends half-way across the space allotted to the township on the map. The first few syllables of this name, the meaning of which does not matter, are Kosh-ah-

baug-ah-maug; but the lake is very beautiful.

When the evening shadows gathered in the shallow valley between the hills and Stony Lake late in the afternoon upon a day in May very long ago, the Mississauga lodges of birch-bark, that stood on the southwestern shore of the lake with the name of many syllables, were draped with umber dimness which deepened around the rain-scoured pearl and cinnamon and buff bark walls until the hollow of heaven was filled with darkness. In one of the weeg-waums the fire was dead, and the powdery gray ash whirled and spun when the wind puffed down through the smoke-hole. In the other lodges the cedar fires were leaping, and the damask-red firelight beamed from the open fronts of the weeg-waums. From the round, skull-like top of one of the hills, where he stood among the gray, scarred rampikes, Tuque Rouge, a *coureur de bois* born out of his true time, discerned these lights spangling the gloom of the gathering night in the valley apparently several downward-dipping miles away.

He was very glad to see those glinting lights, for he had been lost for two days and a night. That was before the country was settled, and it is very easy to get lost even now in Metheun township. He was very hungry. Six ham sandwiches are quite inadequate to nurture a man through two slow-passing days. He had been endeavoring to find an elusive lumber camp, and had lost himself in the deeps of a dim, still forest where Nature seemed to have been holding her breath, with her finger pressed to her lip, for a hundred million years. He had elevated himself to the summit of the hill in order to enjoy the view. Sometimes places where men inhabit are in sight from the top of a hill.

He went down the long slow slope with swaying shoulders. He was nearly exhausted, to tell the truth. He passed through a spruce woods. From the little lake pealed the whooping laughter of a loon. Over the huddling spruces rushed a flock of wild geese, swinging low, and intoning all together their joyous, deep-throated chant, which quickly softened away. He walked across a beaver meadow toward the winking lights. A bull-lunged bittern in the cedars on the lake shore repeated her hoarse pumping call. He drew very near and could see the tall lodges dimly

looming. The puffing wind fanned the lodge-fires, and the flames leaped up, bloody and licking, and tinted the insides of the lodges. In the middle lodge a large man squatted, bending over his fire, smoking his red clay op-waw-gawn. "Wauah!" (hello) said Tuque Rouge, and the big man raised a face he knew.

He was Michigawn Shegaug, a half-breed packer, whom Tuque Rouge had met on the Height of Land the summer before, packing two sacks of flour in one load. The wind gushed through the lodge doorway as he lifted his head, and Tuque Rouge saw the bulging neck-muscles that the tump-line had developed. The big half-breed shambled from his weeg-waum. He was a pagan with a heart full of old-fashioned kindness.

An hour later, after rating much more than a man should devour at one sitting, and drinking about a quart of strong black tea, Tuque Rouge went, asleep rolled in a four point camp blanket, and did not awaken until the next afternoon.

On the following morning, just as the gray light was warming into lilac, before the sun had swung up clear of the sky-line in the flushing east, Michigawn Shegaug and Tuque Rouge, carrying a frying pan, a tin pail, two tin cups, and provisions for two days in a basket, walked across the short portage trail to Stony Lake. In a clump of rod cedars that reached out heavy branches over the water the half-breed had a birch-bark canoe *cached*. In the canoe were two Indian beaver-tail paddles and tackle for stream bait fishing and trolling. They put the canoe into the water, and with the long lifting stroke of Ontario backwoodsmen, deep dip and swift, measured swing, they paddled across to the northern shore.

Where that lacerated wild-water, Eels' Creek, slipping and spilling over laurentian boulders, and sliding over vertical gneiss dips, which form beautiful cascades, pours into the lake, they landed and pulling the canoe on shore, *cached* her in some thick juniper bushes. Cutting willow poles and tying to their tips light lines with small unsnelled Limerick hooks, they caught a few trout in the deep brown pools below the laughing and shouting reaches, using bits of bacon for bait. Alas, there are no trout in Eels' Creek now.

Long before the position of the sun, which peered wanly through wooly clouds, indicated that it was noon, Michigawn Shegaug

stopped fishing and began to cook. First he dressed the trout, dividing them into pink flakes. Then he mixed batter with flour and water in the tin pail, made a variety or flapjack in the frying pan, fried the trout with slices of fat bacon, and made tea.

Under a stately white pine that reared up like a tower, the two men, wolf hungry, devoured their simply cooked, but delicious meal. The sky was padded with fat drab clouds when they finished, and they had just lighted their pipes when the rain came threshing down. But the thick branches were like a roof over their heads. A crystal arras of rain hung from the sky for two hours, and through it the Blue Mountains looked like hills of dream.

When the sousing shower was over they returned to the mouth of the creek, where it bounds like a buck over some bevelled rocks into a wine-purple pool. From this pool they took some brown trout, and as the afternoon drew on toward a tender close they launched their canoe and paddled slowly along the northern shore of the lake. A fringe of tall weeds frilled the shore, shaking in the light wind. The canoe slipped along close to the shuddering weeds, the flicking paddle blades splitting the water without sound. Michigawn Shegaug reached back, and from under the stern dock behind him he drew a trolling line with vicious-looking treble hooks almost hidden in a tuft of the brilliant feathers of the cardinal bird, and with a broad spoon made of half a clam shell, which gleamed richly, showing the tenderest tints of opal and pearl. "Mebby-so we geet beeg feesh," observed the half-breed with simplicity, dropping the malignant hooks and spoon and about fifteen feet of line over the gunwale.

The glimmering spoon began to gyrate in the water, looking like a white wing. As Shegaug dipped his paddle again and the canoe slid faster, it sank, spinning swiftly. It was an alluring fraud.

Keenoosh-aw Ogeemah, with indolently fanning tail and shivering fins, lay among the weeds in the brown-green dusk, six feet below the surface. This meshed and woven weed-bed was one of the many ambuscades in different parts of the lake, from which he flashed like a thrown spear upon his prey. His glinting, button-like eyes caught the gleam of the flicking spoon as it trailed within ten feet of his ugly nose. The old shark darted out instantly and gorged

the hooks and spoon. He was always hungry.

Shegaug had the line between his strong teeth, and when the fish gave a quick impatient jerk, he lifted his paddle from the water and laid it across the cross-bar in front of him with a quick movement. "Got heem, dam' heem," he said, with calm, and swiftly he tossed about sixty feet of the unreeled line overboard, using both hands. Then he began to paddle furiously and Tuque Rouge, in the bow, followed his example. The light canoe skated obliquely across toward several small islands, half a mile away.

Keenoosh-aw Ogeemah knew nothing about hooks; but blind rage fumed within him. Diving to the bottom of the lake, he swam swiftly away from the shore, but on a wide slant from the canoe's course. Within a minute the heavy braided line was straining and stretching like a tow rope. Then the king fish rose quickly and leaped into the air, his long body bent into a curve. He made an energetic endeavor to release himself, bucking and jerking on the line. But the cord stood strain. He went down again, and the line slackened as he swam toward the canoe. Shegaug swiftly hauled in the slack. About thirty feet of line came dripping over the laced gunwale, when, of a sudden, the fish swung around and the wet coils ran out again. Shegaug made the line fast to the cross-bar in front of him just before the fish began towing the canoe. The half-breed laughed almost audibly. "One time," he remarked, "beeg feesh she tow me all 'round Juniper Island." He scraped a match and hollowed his big brown hands above his bowl pipe. Thoughtlessly he leaned a little sidewise, and the canoe capsized with startling suddenness.

The round-bottomed Mississauga bark canoes have no stability worth even casual mention. For reasons insufficient these egg-shell canoes dip with astonishing quickness and the fellows in them are surprised and pained. Shegaug had his long legs underneath the stern cross-bar, and the trolling line got looped around his ankles. He had to break it, but held the end tenaciously in one hand. With a tremendous effort, Tuque Rouge managed to right the canoe and crawled in, writhing over the bow deck. She was half full of water, but the paddles were floating under the cross-bars, and the grub basket, which had been stowed

under the bow deck, had not dropped out. The big half-breed apparently was quite as much at home in the water as Keenoosh-aw Ogeemah. He was floating high, and the strong-swimming fish was towing him towards the islands.

"Water dam' cold," he alleged, cheerfully. Tuque Rouge, laughing, swung the canoe around with a scooping stroke, ran her alongside him, took the line out of his hand, and with great difficulty, for the fish was pulling hard, knotted the broken ends. Shegaug heaved his long body half out of the water, and drew himself in over the stern deck. Thus, these two voyagers euchred adversity by strenuous endeavor. After that they well deserved their fish.

Tuque Rouge got the tin pail out of the grub-basket and threw some of the water he was kneeling in back into the lake, where it belonged. Keenoosh-aw swam straight on between the islands into the open lake beyond, using up his energy. When Shegaug thought the fish must be nearly exhausted, he hauled on the line with all his strength. The king fish, whirling around, sprang clear of the water again, flopping and bucking. Then, becoming tired, he lay quiescent on the surface and allowed the half-breed to haul him up within a few feet of the canoe. Possibly Shegaug might have pulled the big fish into the canoe then, but he knew the old wolf was full of fierce energy and vitality yet, and was afraid he would upset the canoe before he could be killed. As the two men stared, admiring him, suddenly he spanked the water with his broad tail, like a beaver, and plunging, disappeared.

Half a mile farther southward there were many islands. The fish swam very fast in that direction, and the canoe skimmed. In a short time the canoe was slipping through narrow channels among the islands. The voyageurs might have landed and beached

their fish, but they were keenly enjoying the sport, and wished to prolong it. Slowly the half-breed drew in the line until only about thirty feet of it remained outboard. The great fish swam slower and slower. He possessed enormous strength, but towing the canoe rapidly was heavy work. He was wearing himself down. In a few minutes he stopped and rising to the surface, passively let Shegaug pull him up close to the canoe again.

The canoe was then in a channel about one hundred yards wide. On the island to the right a broad shelf of rock sloped slowly to the water's edge, forming a natural wharf upon which men might land easily from a canoe. Shagaug decided to land there and kill the fish. He swung the bow of the canoe toward the island. But the fighting devil in Keenoosh-aw Ogeemah awoke again and he endeavored to enliven the proceedings once more. He started away with the canoe again, but his captors dug their paddle blades deep, and paddling backward with all their energy, stopped the water-wolf. He came to the surface writhing and doubling, and thrashing the water into spume with his tail. Then suddenly he lay still, as if black despair had seized upon his brave spirit, and slowly sank to the bottom.

A dozen heaving paddle strokes slid the canoe alongside the gently sloping rock. Shegaug sprang out and quickly dragged the mighty fish up on the bare shelf. He floated in belly upward, as if utterly spent. But when the half-breed struck him heavily on his mailed back-head with a large chunk of rock he bucked vigorously until he received a second smashing blow. Then, shuddering, he expired.

Concerning the weight of this fish, he was six feet long and must have weighed thirty pounds. Perhaps a pound or two more.

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