

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## THE "FUZZINESS" OF HOOCKLA-HEEN

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HOOCKLA-HEEN half-crouched, half-knelt in the tall, dank grass. Not a motion passed over him, yet he had been there a long, long hour. In his hands he held a slender bow, with bone-barbed arrow strung in place; and he would have seemed turned to stone had it not been for the look of eagle alertness in his face. In fact, he was never more alive than at that very moment. His nostrils gave him full report of the green and growing things, of the budded willows and quaking aspens down by the edge of the low bank, of the great red raspberries thickly studding the bushes at his back, and over to the right, a dozen paces away and well hidden, he knew there must be a clump of the bright-colored but poisonous snake-flower.

His senses told him many things. He felt the moisture of the grass creeping and soaking through his moosehide trousers and chilling his knees, and by its breath on his brow he knew that the light breeze was hauling slowly around in the pale wake of the moon. And of the low hum of sound which rose from the land, his ears distinguished each component part—the rustling of the leaves and grasses, the calls of birds and squirrels and wild fowl, and the myriad noises of a vast insect life.

But chief of all was one sound which made his face grow tense with expectancy. Just before him a tangle of sticks and poles, laid together in rude order, dammed the swampy stream and formed a shallow pond. Through a break in the dam the water gurgled noisily. That, however, was not the sound which held him. From above he heard the faint, sharp slap of some object upon the earth, followed by the plump of a body into water. Then silence settled down again, and he stared steadily at the break through which the water slipped away.

But as he waited a new sound disturbed him. From far below came the low whine of a dog, and once the crackle of a broken twig. And although he felt vexation at this, his face gave no sign, while he centered his whole consciousness in his one sense of hearing. From above there came a low splashing, nearer than before, and from below the crackle of another breaking twig, likewise nearer.

It was if these approaching sounds were running a race, and he wished the one from the water to win. And win it did, for a ripple broke the surface of the pond and a small log floated into the opening in the dam. Shoving it along, he could make out a large, ratlike head, with little, round ears laid back and nearly lost in hair.

Hooekla-Heen bent his bow noiselessly and waited. The animal pushed and shoved at the log, trying to block the opening. Failing in this, it crawled cautiously out on the dam, exposing three feet and more of body, covered with fur of heavy chestnut-brown. A crackle of twigs from below, and the animal rose suspiciously on its hind legs to listen. Then it was that Hooekla-Heen felt the thrill of achievement, the consciousness of having done and done well, as the arrow sped through the moonlight, singing its shrill song and transfixing the animal, which knew its end in the sound.

The boy, for Hoockla-Heen could boast but twelve years, sprang upright and called out joyously. A like call came from below and a tremendous crashing of underbrush answered him; and as he stooped and lifted the beaver by its broad, flat tail, another boy broke out of the bushes and waded to him through the grass.

"And hast thou got that old gray nose at last?" the newcomer questioned, excitedly.

"Aye," Hoockla-Heen made answer, coldly, hiding his exultation under an impassive mask. "Aye, old gray nose, and small thanks to thee, Klanik, who flounder over the ground like a blind bull moose and make much noise."

"I came softly," the other boy replied, a little hurt by the censure.

"Yes, with a whining dog."

"Broken Tooth would follow me, but I sent him back," said Klanik. "Did you know," he went on, eagerly, "that the tribe is to journey down to see these white men of the Yukon?"

Upon that, Hoockla-Heen danced gleefully up and down. Klanik joined hands with him, and they circled round and round till, in sheer excess of joy, the dance was turned into a wrestling bout, and they were panting and straining to the utmost. Klanik finally slipped on the beaver's tail, and Hoockla-Heen, profiting by the advantage, forced him suddenly backward and pressed his shoulders into the soggy ground. Then they sprang to their feet, laughing, and started down the trail to camp with the burden of the beaver shared between them.

On the way Klanik told of what had taken place at the council. Kootznaloo, one of their bravest hunters, had wandered off the previous fall, and after a long absence

had returned with incredible tales of the white men. He had gone down the White River farther than the tribe had ever ventured; he had gone to the great Yukon, and the wonderful city of Dawson. At the council he had spoken of the many furs the tribe possessed, of how highly furs were esteemed by the white men, and of his plan for the tribe to go down to Dawson and trade these furs for immense wealth in guns and blankets and scarlet cloths.

But Ya-Koo, the maker of medicine, had opposed him. As they all knew, he, too, had been among the white men once upon a time, and he could tell that the white men were very bad. This Kootznaloo denied; the white men were very good, he said, in token whereof had he not returned with a fine new gun?

So the discussion waged to and fro. Many who had never seen white men had agreed with Kootznaloo. Moreover, all of them were anxious to possess fine new guns like his. Hoockla-Heen's father, Kow-Whi, who was chief, had also declared in favor of Kootznaloo's project; and Ya-Koo, though he was medicine-man to the tribe, had been forced to give in. In two days, it had been decided, now that summer was come and the rivers running free, the whole tribe, men, women and children, would load their canoes and depart for the wonder city.

For some time after Klanik had finished telling of what occurred at the council the boys walked on in silence. The Klanik spoke again, gravely: "It is not to be believed that these white men are white, all over white—face, hands, everything."

"Aye," Hoockla-Heen answered, absently, "and their eyes are of the color of summer skies when there are no clouds."

Klanik looked at him curiously, for Klanik knew many strange things concerning

Hooekla-Heen of which Hooekla-Heen himself was ignorant—things which Kow-Whi and Ya-Koo had commanded should never be spoken.

But Hooekla-Heen went on: "And their womenkind are fair and soft, and their hair is yellow, quite yellow, and often I remember —

He stopped suddenly and looked into the curious eyes of his chum.

"What dost thou remember?" Klanik queried, gently. "Thou hast never seen the white men and their womenkind."

"I remember —"

"Truly art thou Hooekla-Heen, the dreamer."

"Aye, I dream." Hooekla-Heen shook his head sadly. "Surely, I dream."

He put his hand before him as if to dispel some vision, and after that, till camp was reached, there was silence between them. But when Hooekla-Heen crept into his furs and pulled the bearskin over him, he could not close his eyes, and sleep was far from him. It was the old sickness, *com-ta-nitch-i-wyan*, come back to him again—the dream-sickness which he had thought outgrown. It was the sickness which, when a little boy, had made the children draw away from him in fear, and the tears come into the eyes of the squaws when they looked upon him. The dream-sickness—how it had made his childhood miserable!

Of course all men dreamed, and even the wolf-dogs; but they dreamed with their eyes shut, when they slept, and he had dreamed with eyes wide open, broad awake. And the men dreamed about things they knew, about hunting and fishing; but he had

dreamed about things he did not know, and which nobody else knew. Haunting memories of things he could not express had come to him; and it seemed, if only he could think back, that all would be clear, only, try as he would, he could not think back.

At such times he felt very much as he did when he was sick of the river fever, and his head was dizzy, his eyes trembling and watery, and his fingers felt twice their natural size, strangely large and fuzzy. Ah, that was it, the very word—fuzzy! That was the way his head felt when he tried to think back.

Then, as he gradually outgrew and forgot it, the dream-sickness had left him. The medicine-man, Ya-Koo, had made public incantation over him, and besought the bad spirits to depart from him, and privately he told him to think back no more, lest misfortune should fall upon him. And he had obeyed, and the thing had gone from him. But now it had come back again. Was there ever such an unhappy boy? He clenched his hands passionately, and for hours stared blindly into the blackness above him.



Chief Kow-Whi's canoe led the procession of the tribe, and with him were Hoockla-Heen and Klanik. All day they had been sweeping down the Yukon, rounding one great bend after another, but they had not landed. They passed one place early in the day where men, white men, were firing off their guns excitedly. Kootznaloo paddled alongside Kow-Whi's canoe and explained that he thought it must be a custom of the white men, although he had never seen the like during the time he spent among them. But after a brief deliberation, not being sure that it was merely a custom, they

decided not to venture in, but to run on to Dawson.

And all day Hooekla-Heen had had attacks of the dream-sickness; and when he had looked a long way off at the white men discharging their guns, he had suffered from an especially severe attack. The fuzziness had been almost overpowering. He was also worried by a feeling that something was going to happen—what he did not know.

He tried to tell Klanik about it, but Klanik had retorted, "Don't be a baby; nothing'll eat you." After that he kept quiet, although he was sure that he was not afraid. Instead, he was very anxious that the thing should happen whatever it was.

At midday the flotilla swung along a series of mighty bluffs and rounded an abrupt turn. Here the Klondike emptied its swollen flood into the Yukon, and here, suddenly, without warning, Dawson burst upon their astonished eyes.

As far as they could see, from river rim to mountain side, was a sea of tents and cabins. And this sea of dwellings spilled over the river rim and down into the water, where the bank was lined for a mile and a half with boats—boats, three and four deep, and scows, dories, canoes and huge rafts, all heaped high with provisions and the possessions of men. The suddenness and the vastness of it took away the breath of the old chief, Kow-Whi, and he could only gaze in speechless wonder.

Hooekla-Heen was almost suffocating with fuzziness. He reached up hurriedly and held his head with both hands. Oh, if he could only understand! What did it all mean?

Klanik cried out sharply to him for missing stroke with his paddle, and with an effort of will he controlled himself. They drove in close to the shore and by the

barracks, where were the Northwest mounted police and where the British banner floated.

Hooekla-Heen pointed to it and said, "That is a *flag*."

"How dost thou know, dreamer?" Klanik demanded.

But Hooekla-Heen did not hear. They were drifting past a great barge loaded with huge animals, as large as a large moose. The sight frightened the women, and several of the canoes sheered out into the stream to give it a wide berth.

"And what manner of animal is that?" Klanik asked, mischievously.

"That is —" Hooekla-Heen hesitated a moment, and then went on confidently, "That is a *horse*."

"Truly, agreed Kootznaloo, whose canoe was alongside, "those be horses. I have seen them before, and they are harmless. But how dost thou know, O Hooekla-Heen?"

Hooekla-Heen shook his head and bent to his paddle as the canoes whirled in to a landing. When all had been made fast, they climbed the steep bank and came upon an open space among the houses. Flags were flying everywhere, but flags different from the one which floated over the barracks; and everywhere were men, firing guns and revolvers into the air and shouting like mad.

A great crowd filled the open space, and as the wide-eyed Indians took up their position on the outskirts the noise died away, and in the center, on a heap of lumber, a man rose and began to speak. Very often he pointed to a flag which flew above his

head, and every little while he was interrupted by clappings of hands and great rolling shouts and volleys of gun-shots. At such times he would pause and drink water from a glass which stood on a box beside him.

"Oh! oh!" Hooekla-Heen cried, striving to clutch at the phantoms which were fluttering through his mind.

"Strange-looking boy, that, for an Indian," remarked a man in a draggled mackinaw jacket, who now and then pulled out a writing-pad and took down notes.

Hooekla-Heen glanced quickly at him, although he did not understand what had been said; but as he looked at him the dream-sickness came over him violently.

The man's companion, clad in a lieutenant's uniform of the mounted police, took the cigar from his lips and exclaimed, "by Jove, he's no ——"

But just then a red-headed boy touched a lighted punk to a string which braided together hundreds of small red tubes. These he threw to the ground. At once there was a tremendous flashing and spluttering and banging, and the Indians, Ya-Koo leading, surged backward in terror.

Hooekla-Heen alone stood his ground. A sudden lightness came upon him, as when the fog rises from the earth and all things shine clear and bright in the sun. The fuzziness had left him. "*Firecrackers!*" he cried, dancing into the exploding mass. "*Firecrackers! The Fourth of July! Hurrah! Hurrah!*"

When the last cracker had gone off he came to himself, startled and blushing under his tanned skin. He looked timidly about him. His tribespeople had come back and were regarding him curiously. Kow-Whi, however, was looking straight before him,

a sad expression on his face. But the lieutenant and the man who made notes had stepped up to him.

"What's your name?" the lieutenant demanded, seizing him by the arm.

"*Jimmy*," he answered, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Then the fuzzy sensation came back to him, and he fell to wondering why he had spoken that strange word. He did not know what the man had said. And what did *Jimmy* mean, anyway? Why had he spoken it?

"Jimmy what?" the lieutenant asked.

Hoocla-Heen shook his head. He did not understand the white man's speech. Besides, his tribespeople were pressing round him excitedly, and Ya-Koo was plucking at his sleeve for him to come away.

"How old are you?"

Again he shook his head, this time adding, "White River," as if it might help.

"Yes, um White River," Kottznaloo corroborated, glad of the chance to play interpreter. "Um White River, 'way up."

"White River, eh?" the lieutenant repeated, in sudden surprise. Then turning to his companion, "How old do you make him out, Dawes?"

Dawes considered, "Twelve or thirteen, I should judge."

The lieutenant pondered audibly: "Summer of '91—winter of '92—four years and eight make twelve —" He broke off suddenly, then cried out, "Dawes! Dawes! It's

the kid, sure! Hold him! As you love me, hold him tight!"

Before Hooekla-Heen could realize what was happening, the lieutenant had jerked open his squirrel-skin shirt, the soft leather tearing down under his grasp. Ya-Koo tried to come between, but the lieutenant thrust him roughly back. There was a murmuring and a snarl from the tribespeople, a flashing of knives from the sheaths and a clicking of rusting guns. But Kow-Whi quieted them with a sharp word of command.

"Look at that! White, eh?" The lieutenant pointed at Hooekla-Heen's naked chest.

Dawes looked carefully and shook his head. "Pretty black, I should judge."

"Oh, that's the sun!" the lieutenant exclaimed, impatiently, at the same time ripping and tearing away at the shirt. "Under the arms, man! Under the arms, where it's untouched!"

"It *is* white!" Dawes cried, with sudden conviction. "What shall we do?"

"Do! I'll show you!" The lieutenant beckoned to the red-headed boy, who was looking on with huge interest. "Hey, you, boy! Run and fetch Jim McDermott. He's right over there in that bunch of men. I saw him not five minutes ago."

The red-headed boy darted off, and Hooekla-Heen watched him go, wondering at it all, and yet aware, that the thing which was to happen was happening.

Kootznaloo was jabbering excitedly to the lieutenant, who was nodding his head to every word and interjecting short, sharp questions.

"But I say, you know, I say, old man, what's up?" Dawes interrupted, pulling out his

writing pad and poised his pencil.

"McDermott, Jim McDermott!" the lieutenant answered hastily. "Old-timer in the country. A bonanza king, worth a couple of millions at least. Used to be an agent for the P. C. C. Company. In '94 came in with his kid and a party from the west coast of Alaska. The wife was to come in the following year by the regular way. Unknown country. First white people to come over it, and the last. Frightful time. Nearly starved to death. In fact, two did. They, being the weakest, were the very ones left in charge of McDermott's boy while McDermott and the others pushed out after game. I heard him tell the story once, how, after three days, when he had got a moose and returned, he found the two men stiff and cold and the boy missing."

"The boy missing?" Dawes's pencil was suspended in mid-air.

"Yes, missing; and never a sign. The camp was close by the river, and McDermott figured that the boy must have crawled to the bank and fallen in. Seems now, though, that some Indian must have landed from a canoe, found the two dead men, and carried the living boy away with him. Of course McDermott never dreamed of such an outcome—but here he is now."

Hooekla-Heen followed the lieutenant's eyes, and saw a tall, dark-bearded man. And wonder! Oh, wonder! Clothed in flesh and blood, it was one of the phantoms of his dreams! He felt suddenly very light again, and the fuzziness went from him.

"*Da-da!*" he cried; "*O da-da!*" and flung himself into the man's arms.

Then followed ten minutes of confusion, everybody explaining at once. Hooekla-Heen remembered nothing except that once or twice the man he had called "Da-da" stooped and kissed him, and that his clutch upon his hand kept growing tighter and

tighter. Then the man said something to him and started to lead him away, still clutching his hand; but Hooekla-Heen did not understand, and stopped.

The man spoke to Kootznaloo, who said to Hooekla-Heen, "This man takes you to see a woman, white woman."

"Ask him if her hair be yellow," Hooekla-Heen commanded.

And when Kootznaloo had interpreted it, the man's face grew bright with gladness, and he stooped and kissed Hooekla-Heen again and yet again.

Kow-Whi was standing apart, silent, his eyes fixed steadily before him, as if he saw nothing of what was taking place. There was a dignity and nobleness about his demeanor, and withal a sadness which the dullest could read.

Hooekla-Heen turned his head and then ran back to him, his eyes filling with tears. There he hesitated, in doubt, looking first to one man and then the other.

"Tell him, and them, that they will see the boy again," McDermott ordered Kootznaloo to say. "And tell them that he shall always remember them, and they are welcome ever to a place by my fire and his. And further, that due reward, and great reward, shall be given."

The thing had happened. It was all right to Hooekla-Heen that he should go up the hill holding this tall, dark-bearded man by the hand. For he knew he was going to see the woman, fair and soft, the woman he often remembered, whose hair was yellow.