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The Lake Gun

James Fenimore Cooper

William Farquhar Payson, New York, 1932

The Seneca is remarkable for its “Wandering Jew,” and the “Lake Gun.” The first is a tree so balanced that when its roots are clear of the bottom it floats with its broken and pointed trunk a few feet above the surface of the water, driving before the winds, or following in the course of the currents. At times, the “Wandering Jew” is seen off Jefferson, near the head of this beautiful sheet; and next it will appear anchored, as it might be, in the shallow water near the outlet.

{“Wandering Jew” = The medieval legend of Ahasuerus, who mocked Christ on his way to the cross and was condemned to live until Judgment Day, is widespread throughout Europe, though he was only identified as a “Jew” in the 17th century—students at Geneva College (now Hobart College) applied the name to a supposedly unsinkable floating log in Lake Seneca, identified as the legendary “Chief Agayentha”; Jefferson = I am indebted to John Gormley of Burdett, NY, for the information that the Village of Jefferson, which I had been unable to locate, was renamed “Watkins” in 1852 and then the current and well-known “Watkins Glen” in 1926. (August, 2011)}

For more than half a century has this remnant of the forest floated about, from point to point, its bald head whitening with time, until its features have become familiar to all the older inhabitants of that region of country. The great depth of the Seneca prevents it from freezing; and summer and winter, springtime and autumn, is this wanderer to be observed; occasionally battling with the ice that makes a short distance from the shore, now pursuing its quiet way before a mild southern air in June, or, again, anchored, by its roots touching the bottom, as it passes a point, or comes in contact with the flats. It has been known to remain a year or two at a time in view of the village of Geneva, until, accustomed to its sight, the people began to think that it was never to move from its berth any more; but a fresh northerly breeze changes all this; the “Jew” swings to the gale, and, like a ship unmooring, drags clear of the bottom, and goes off to the southward, with its head just high enough above water to be visible. It would seem really that his wanderings are not to cease as long as wood will float.

{Village of Geneva = now the City of Geneva, at the northern end of Lake Seneca}

No white man can give the history of this “Jew.” He was found laving his sides in the pure waters of the Seneca by the earliest settlers, and it may have been ages since his wanderings commenced. When they are to cease is a secret in the womb of time.

The “Lake Gun” is a mystery. It is a sound resembling the explosion of a heavy piece of artillery, that can be accounted for by none of the known laws of nature. The report is deep, hollow, distant, and imposing. The lake seems to be speaking to the surrounding hills, which send back the echoes of its voice in accurate reply. No satisfactory theory has ever been broached to explain these noises. Conjectures have been hazarded about chasms, and the escape of compressed air by the sudden admission of water; but all this is talking at random, and has probably no foundation in truth. The most that can be said is, that such sounds are heard, though at long intervals, and that no one as yet has succeeded in ascertaining their cause.

{“The Lake Gun” = The “Lake Gun” or “Lake Drum” is a mysterious booming sound occasionally heard on Lake Seneca (and on neighboring Lake Cayuga), which has been given a variety of scientific, literary, and legendary interpretations.}

It is not many lustrums since curiosity induced an idler, a traveler, and one possessed

of much attainment derived from journeys in distant lands, first to inquire closely into all the traditions connected with these two peculiarities of the Seneca, and, having thus obtained all he could, to lead him to make the tour of the entire lake, in the hope of learning more by actual personal observation. He went up and down in the steamboat; was much gratified with his trip, but could see or hear nothing to help him in his investigation. The “Gun” had not been heard in a long time, and no one could tell him what had become of the “Wandering Jew.” In vain did his eyes roam over the broad expanse of water; they could discover nothing to reward their search. There was an old man in the boat, of the name of Peter, who had passed his life on the Seneca, and to him was our traveler referred, as the person most likely to gratify his curiosity. Fuller (for so we shall call the stranger for the sake of convenience) was not slow to profit by this hint, and was soon in amicable relations with the tough, old, fresh-water mariner. A half-eagle opportunely bestowed opened all the stores of Peter’s lore; and he professed himself ready to undertake a cruise, even, for the especial purpose of hunting up the “Jew.”

{lustrum = a period of five years; half eagle = a U.S. gold coin worth \$5.00}

“I haven’t seen that ere crittur now”—Peter always spoke of the tree as if it had animal life—“these three years. We think he doesn’t like the steamboats. The very last time I seed the old chap he was a-goin’ up afore a smart norwester, and we was a-comin’ down with the wind in our teeth, when I made out the ‘Jew,’ about a mile, or, at most, a mile and a half ahead of us, and right in our track. I remember that I said to myself, says I, ‘Old fellow, we’ll get a sight of your countenance this time.’ I suppose you know, sir, that the ‘Jew’ has a face just like a human?”

“I did not know that; but what became of the tree?”

“Tree,” answered Peter, shaking his head, “why, can’t we cut a tree down in the woods, saw it and carve it as we will, and make it last a hundred years? What become of the tree, sir;—why, as soon as the ‘Jew’ saw we was a-comin’ so straight upon him, what does the old chap do but shift his helm, and make for the west shore. You never seed a steamer leave sich a wake, or make sich time. If he went half a knot, he went twenty!”

This little episode rather shook Fuller’s faith in Peter’s accuracy; but it did not prevent his making an arrangement by which he and the old man were to take a cruise in quest of the tree, after having fruitlessly endeavored to discover in what part of the lake it was just then to be seen.

“Some folks pretend he’s gone down,” said Peter, in continuation of a discourse on the subject, as he flattened in the sheets of a very comfortable and rather spacious sailboat, on quitting the wharf of Geneva, “and will never come up ag’in. But they may just as well tell me that the sky is coming down, and that we may set about picking up the larks. That ‘Jew’ will no more sink than a well-corked bottle will sink.”

{picking up the larks = “When the sky falls we shall catch larks” is an old proverb, meaning that an idea or suggestion is ridiculous}

This was the opinion of Peter. Fuller cared but little for it, though he still fancied he might make his companion useful in hunting up the object of his search. These two strangely-assorted companions cruised up and down the Seneca for a week, vainly endeavoring to find the “Wandering Jew.” Various were the accounts they gleaned from

the different boatmen. One had heard he was to be met with off this point; another, in that bay: all believed he might be found, though no one had seen him lately—some said, in many years.

“He’ll turn up,” said Peter, positively, “or the Seneca would go down bows foremost. We shall light on the old chap when we least expect it.”

It must be confessed that Peter had many sufficient reasons for entertaining these encouraging hopes. He was capitally fed, had very little more to do than to ease off, or flatten in a sheet, the boat being too large to be rowed; and cigars, and liquors of various sorts were pretty much at his command, for the obvious reason that they were under his care. In delivering his sentiments, however, Peter was reasonably honest, for he had the most implicit faith, not only in the existence of this “Jew,” but in the beneficent influence of his visits. His presence was universally deemed a sign of good luck.

Fuller passed most of the nights in a comfortable bed, leaving Peter in the boat; sometimes asking for lodgings in a farm-house, and, at others, obtaining them in an inn. Wherever he might be, he inquired about the “Wandering Jew” and the “Lake Gun,” bent on solving these two difficult problems, if possible, and always with the same success. Most persons had seen the former, but not lately; while about one in ten had heard the latter. It occurred to our traveler that more of the last were to be found nearer to the northern than to the southern end of the lake.

The cruise continued a fortnight in this desultory manner, with the same want of success. One morning, as Fuller was returning to the boat, after passing the night in a farm-house, he was struck by the statue-like appearance of a figure which stood on the extreme point of a low, rocky promontory, that was considerably aside from any dwelling or building. The place was just at the commencement of the hill country, and where the shores of the Seneca cease to offer those smiling pictures of successful husbandry that so much abound farther north. A somber, or it might be better to say a sober, aspect gave dignity to the landscape, which, if not actually grand, had, at least, most of the elements that characterize the noble in nature.

But Fuller, at the moment, was less struck with the scenery, charming as that certainly was, than with the statue-like and immovable form on the little promontory. A single tree shaded the spot where the stranger stood, but it cast its shadows toward the west, at that early hour, leaving the erect and chiseled form in clear sun-light. Stimulated by curiosity, and hoping to learn something that might aid him in his search from one as curious as himself, Fuller turned aside, and, instead of descending to the spot where Peter had the boat ready for his reception, he crossed a pleasant meadow, in the direction of the tree.

Several times did our traveler stop to gaze on that immovable form. A feeling of superstition came over him when he saw that not the smallest motion, nor relief of limb or attitude, was made for the ten minutes that his eye had rested on the singular and strange object. As he drew nearer, however, the outlines became more and more distinct, and he fancied that the form was actually naked. Then the truth became apparent: it was a native of the forest, in his summer garb, who had thrown aside his blanket, and stood in his leggings, naked. Phidias could not have cut in stone a more faultless form; for active, healthful youth had given to it the free and noble air of manly but modest independence.

{Phidias = a very famous Greek sculptor of the 5th century B.C.}

“Sago,” said Fuller, drawing near to the young Indian, who did not betray surprise or emotion of any sort, as the stranger’s foot-fall came unexpectedly on his ear, using the salutation of convention, as it is so generally practiced between the two races. The Indian threw forward an arm with dignity, but maintained his erect and otherwise immovable attitude.

{Sago = a term of greeting, as Cooper believed, among American Indians}

“Oneida?” demanded Fuller, while he doubted if any young warrior of that half-subdued tribe could retain so completely the air and mien of the great forests and distant prairies.

“Seneca,” was the simple answer. The word was uttered in a tone so low and melancholy that it sounded like saddened music. Nothing that Fuller had ever before heard conveyed so much meaning so simply, and in so few syllables. It illuminated the long vista of the past, and cast a gloomy shadow into that of the future, alluding to a people driven from their haunts, never to find another resting-place on earth. That this young warrior so meant to express himself—not in an abject attempt to extort sympathy, but in the noble simplicity of a heart depressed by the fall of his race—Fuller could not doubt; and every generous feeling of his soul was enlisted in behalf of this young Indian.

“Seneca,” he repeated slowly, dropping his voice to something like the soft, deep tones of the other; “then you are in your own country, here?”

“My country,” answered the red man, coldly, “no; my FATHER’S country, yes.”

His English was good, denoting more than a common education, though it had a slightly foreign or peculiar accent. The intonations of his voice were decidedly those of the Indian.

“You have come to visit the land of your fathers?”

A slight wave of the hand was the reply. All this time the young Seneca kept his eye fastened in one direction, apparently regarding some object in the lake. Fuller could see nothing to attract this nearly riveted gaze, though curiosity induced him to make the effort.

“You admire this sheet of water, by the earnest manner in which you look upon it?” observed Fuller.

“See!” exclaimed the Indian, motioning toward a point near a mile distant. “He moves! may be he will come here.”

“Moves! I see nothing but land, water, and sky. What moves?”

“The Swimming Seneca. For a thousand winters he is to swim in the waters of this lake. Such is the tradition of my people. Five hundred winters are gone by since he was thrown into the lake; five hundred more must come before he will sink. The curse of the Manitou is on him. Fire will not burn him; water will not swallow him up; the fish will not go near him; even the accursed axe of the settler can not cut him into chips! There he floats, and must float, until his time is finished!”

{Swimming Seneca = though I have been unable to discover any genuine Native American origin for this legend, a detailed variation of it can be found in a poem, “Oualissa”, by Rev.

Ralph Hoyt, published in "Sketches by Rev. Hoyt, Vol. VIII" (New York. C. Shepard, n.d. [ca. 1848] (the Geneva College library copy of which is inscribed "DeLancey" and may have belonged to the family of Cooper's brother-in-law, Episcopal Bishop of Western New York William Heathcote De Lancey (1797-1865), who lived in Geneva)—a somewhat different version forms the Geneva (Hobart) College student legend of Chief Agayentha or "The Floating Chief.")

"You must mean the 'Wandering Jew?'"

"So the pale-faces call him; but he was never a Jew. 'Tis a chief of the Senecas, thrown into the lake by the Great Spirit, for his bad conduct. Whenever he tries to get upon the land, the Spirit speaks to him from the caves below, and he obeys."

"THAT must mean the 'Lake Gun?'"

"So the pale-faces call it. It is not strange that the names of the red man and of the pale-faces should differ."

"The races are not the same, and each has its own traditions. I wish to hear what the Senecas say about this floating tree; but first have the goodness to point it out to me."

The young Indian did as Fuller requested. Aided by the keener vision of the red man, our traveler at length got a glimpse of a distant speck on the water, which his companion assured him was the object of their mutual search. He himself had been looking for the "Jew" a week, but had asked no assistance from others, relying on the keenness of his sight and the accuracy of his traditions. That very morning he had first discovered the speck on the water, which he now pointed out to his companion.

"You think, then, that yonder object is the 'Wandering Jew?'" asked Fuller.

"It is the Swimming Seneca. Five hundred winters has he been obliged to keep in the chilled waters of the lake; in five hundred more the Manitou will let him rest on its bottom."

"What was the offense that has drawn down upon this chief so severe a punishment?"

"Listen to our traditions, and you shall know. When the Great Spirit created man, He gave him laws to obey, and duties to perform—"

"Excuse me, Seneca, but your language is so good that I hardly know what to make of you."

An almost imperceptible smile played about the compressed lip of the young Indian, who, at first, seemed disposed to evade an explanation; but, on reflection, he changed his purpose, and communicated to Fuller the outlines of a very simple, and, by no means, unusual history. He was a chief of the highest race in his tribe, and had been selected to receive the education of a pale-face at one of the colleges of that people. He had received a degree, and, yielding to the irrepressible longings of what might almost be termed his nature, he no sooner left the college in which he had been educated, than he resumed the blanket and leggings, under the influence of early recollections, and a mistaken appreciation of the comparative advantages between the civilized condition, and those of a life passed in the forest and on the prairies. In this respect our young Seneca resembles the white American, who, after a run of six months in Europe, returns home with the patriotic declaration in his mouth, that his native land is preferable to all other lands. Fuller soon

understood the case, when both reverted to their common object in coming thither. The young Seneca thereupon resumed his explanation.

{the young Indian = almost certainly based on Abraham La Fort or De-hat-ka-tons (1799-1848), an Oneida Indian who attended Geneva College in the late 1820s, but who later abandoned Christianity and returned to his traditional way of life}

“These laws of the Great Spirit,” continued the Seneca, “were not difficult to obey so long as the warrior was of a humble mind, and believed himself inferior to the Manitou, who had fashioned him with His hands, and placed him between the Seneca and the Cayuga, to hunt the deer and trap the beaver. But See-wise was one of those who practiced arts that you pale-faces condemn, while you submit to them. He was a demagogue among the red men, and set up the tribe in opposition to the Manitou.”

{See-wise = intended to represent William Henry Seward’s surname}

“How,” exclaimed Fuller, “did the dwellers in the forest suffer by such practices?”

“Men are every where the same, let the color, or the tribe, or the country be what it may. It was a law of our people, one which tradition tells us came direct from the Great Spirit, that the fish should be taken only in certain seasons, and for so many moons. Some thought this law was for the health of the people; others, that it was to enable the fish to multiply for the future. All believed it wise, because it came from the Manitou, and had descended to the tribe through so many generations: all but See-wise. He said that an Indian ought to fish when and where he pleased; that a warrior was not a woman; that the spear and the hook had been given to him to be used, like the bow and arrow, and that none but cowardly Indians would scruple to take the fish when they wished. Such opinions pleased the common Indians, who love to believe themselves greater than they are. See-wise grew bolder by success, until he dared to say in council, that the red men made the world themselves, and for themselves, and that they could do with it what they pleased. He saw no use in any night; it was inconvenient; an Indian could sleep in the light as well as in the darkness; there was to be eternal day; then the hunt could go on until the deer was killed, or the bear treed. The young Indians liked such talk. They loved to be told they were the equals of the Great Spirit. They declared that See-wise should be their principal chief. See-wise opened his ears wide to this talk, and the young men listened to his words as they listened to the song of the mocking-bird. They liked each other, because they praised each other. It is sweet to be told that we are better and wiser than all around us. It is sweet to the red man; the pale-faces may have more sober minds—”

The Seneca paused an instant, and Fuller fancied that a smile of irony again struggled about his compressed lip. As the traveler made no remark, however, the youthful warrior resumed his tale.

“I hear a great deal of what demagogues are doing among your people, and of the evil they produce. They begin by flattering, and end by ruling. He carries a strong hand, who makes all near him help to uphold it. In the crowd few perceive its weight until it crushes them.

“Thus was it with See-wise. Half the young men listened to him, and followed in his trail. The aged chiefs took counsel together. They saw that all the ancient traditions were despised, and that new conduct was likely to come in with new opinions. They were too

old to change. What was done has never been said, but See-wise disappeared. It was whispered that he had gone down among the fish he loved to take out of season. There is one tradition, that he speared an enormous salmon, and the fish, in its struggles, drew him out of his canoe, and that his hands could not let go of the handle of his spear. Let this be as it may, no one ever saw See-wise any more, in the form in which he had been known to his people. At length the trunk of a tree was seen floating about the Seneca, and one of the oldest of the chiefs, pointing to it, pronounced the name of 'See-wise.' He would fish out of season, and his spirit is condemned, they say, to float among the salmon, and trout, and eels, for a thousand winters. It was not long after this that the lake began to speak, in a voice loud as the thunder from the clouds. The Seneca traditions say this is the Manitou calling to See-wise, when he goes down after the fish, out of season."

"And do you, an educated man, believe in this tale?" asked Fuller.

"I can not say. The things learned in childhood remain the longest on the memory. They make the deepest marks. I have seen the evil that a demagogue can do among the pale-faces; why should I not believe the same among my own people?"

"This is well enough, as respects the curse on the demagogue; but lakes do not usually ___"

Fuller had got thus far, when the Seneca, as if in mockery, emitted the sound that has obtained the name of the "Lake Gun" among those who have lived on its banks in these later times. Perhaps it was, in part, the influence of the Seneca's legend, united to the opinions and statements of the inhabitants of that region, which conspired to make our traveler start, in awe and surprise; for, certainly, the deep-mouthed cannon never gave forth a more impressive and sudden concussion on the ear.

"It does, indeed, sound very like a gun!" said Fuller, after a long pause had enabled him to speak.

"It is the voice of the Great Spirit, forbidding See-wise to fish," answered the Seneca. "For a time the demagogue has all the talking to himself, but, sooner or later, the voice of truth is heard, which is the voice of the Manitou. But I must go nearer to the tree—ha! what has become of it?"

Fuller looked, and, sure enough, the speck on the water had vanished. This might have been by an unobserved movement in a current; or it might have been owing to a sudden variation in the light; certain it was, no tree could now be seen. Fuller then proposed to use his boat, in endeavoring to get nearer to the "Jew." The Seneca gave a very cheerful assent, and, throwing his light summer blanket, with an air of manly grace, over a shoulder, he followed to the water-side.

"Most red men," resumed the young warrior, as he took his place in the boat, "would see something marvelous in this appearance and disappearance of the swimming Seneca, and would hesitate about going any nearer to him; but this is not my feeling—error is strengthened by neglecting to look into truth. I hope yet to go near See-wise."

Fuller hardly knew what to think of his companion's credulity. At times he appeared to defer to the marvelous and the traditions of his tribe; then, again, the lights of education would seem to gleam upon the darkness of his superstition, and leave him a man of

inductive reason. As for himself, he was probably not altogether as much of the last as his pride of race would have led him to hope.

Peter had seen nothing, but he had heard the “Gun.”

“‘T was a mere flash in the pan to what I have heard, when the lake is in ‘arnest,” said the old fellow, with the love of exaggeration so common with the vulgar. “Still, it was a gun.”

“A signal that the ‘Wandering Jew’ is near by; so, haul aft the sheets, and let us depart.”

In a quarter of an hour the boat was lying with her foresheet hauled over, and her helm down, within a hundred yards of the object of the long search of the whole party. It was deep water, and a slight ripple under what might be termed the cutwater of the tree indicated a movement. Perhaps a lower current forced forward the roots, which, in their turn, urged the trunk ahead. As often happens in such cases, the accidental formation of the original fracture, aided by the action of the weather, had given to the end of the trunk a certain resemblance to a human countenance. Peter was the first to point out the peculiarity, which he looked upon uneasily. Fuller soon observed it, and said the aspect was, in sooth, that of a demagogue. The forehead retreated, the face was hatchet-shaped, while the entire expression was selfish, yet undecided. As for the Seneca, he gazed on these signs with wonder, mingled with awe.

{hatchet shaped = William Henry Seward was famous for his angular, hatchet-shaped nose}

“We see here the wicked See-wise. The Great Spirit—call him Manitou, or call him God—does not forget what is wrong, or what is right. The wicked may flourish for a while, but there is a law that is certain to bring him within the power of punishment. Evil spirits go up and down among us, but there is a limit they can not pass. But Indians like this Swimming Seneca do much harm. They mislead the ignorant, arouse evil passions, and raise themselves into authority by their dupes. The man who tells the people their faults is a truer friend than he who harps only on their good qualities. Be that only a tree, or be it a man bound in this form, for a thousand winters, by the hand of the Great Spirit, it tells the same story. See-wise did once live. His career comes to us in traditions, and we believe all that our fathers told us. Accursed be the man who deceives, and who opens his mouth only to lie! Accursed, too, is the land that neglects the counsels of the fathers to follow those of the sons!”

“There is a remarkable resemblance between this little incident in the history of the Senecas and events that are passing among our pale-faced race of the present age. Men who, in their hearts, really care no more for mankind than See-wise cared for the fish, lift their voices in shouts of a spurious humanity, in order to raise themselves to power, on the shoulders of an excited populace. Bloodshed, domestic violence, impracticable efforts to attain an impossible perfection, and all the evils of a civil conflict are forgotten or blindly attempted, in order to raise themselves in the arms of those they call the people.”

“I know your present condition,” answered the young Seneca, openly smiling. “The Manitou may have ordered it for your good. Trust to HIM. There are days in which the sun is not seen—when a lurid darkness brings a second night over the earth. It matters not. The great luminary is always there. There may be clouds before his face, but the winds

will blow them away. The man or the people that trust in God will find a lake for every
See-wise.”