



*The Legend
of
Chocorua*

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

*A Story of the Hills of
New Hampshire*



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THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

I

NOWHERE in history have I seen recorded the following tale of the Penacook Indians. This legend I had the rare good fortune to hear from the lips of a stern-visaged old warrior of the White Hills whose wigwam was not far from here and who earned his living at that time braiding baskets from the roots and tender branches of trees, selling them to residents and visitors in this vicinity.

One day I was fortunate to find him in a reminiscent mood, and he proceeded to unfold to me the following legend which, he assured me, had been handed down in his tribe for the past two hundred years. He became so engrossed in the story that the half-finished basket lay forgotten, and he was carried back to the days of long ago

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

when he had been surrounded by valiant braves, the descendants of this tribe of Indians.

In the days of which his story dealt the soil was very fertile and bore bountiful harvests of golden maize. Various fruits were to be found in the surrounding country and, moreover, the waters were abundantly filled with fish. In the forests deer and other game were plentiful, and choice venison was easily procured at any time.

When our forefathers first set foot in the White Hills they found them inhabited by a tribe of Indians called the Penacooks, with their chief, the stately Chocorua. Tall of stature, with a figure as straight as the white pine of the forest, and with muscles which gave proof of an abundance of reserve energy, this warrior chief was the brave leader of these Penacooks, and it was due to his wisdom and courage that the tribe had become one of the most powerful in this section of the country.

The Penacooks roamed from the White Hills to the Atlantic Ocean, and the chase

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

often led them into the recesses of the mountains, but their favorite camping grounds were at Lake Winnepesaukee and at Lake Ossipee.*

Far to the westward, among the Adirondacks, lived their once deadly and most dreaded enemy, the Mohawks, but the Penacooks had defeated them so many times in battle that now fear no longer entered their hearts at the sound of the Mohawk war-cry, and they had remained unmolested by any tribe for a long while. In fact, all the neighboring tribes had learned from experience that the Penacooks were to be feared above all others and for this reason a long period of peace and prosperity had been enjoyed. But a new foe was about to disturb the serenity of their camp-fire.

Among the Penacook warriors was one who was taller, stronger and braver than all the rest; Wonalancet was his name, and

* Arrowheads and other stone implements, relics of this tribe of Indians, are still frequently found on the shore of this beautiful lake.

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

he was the eldest son of Passaconaway, the sachem of the tribe. He knew no fear and his eye was sharp as that of the eagle and the chief relied much upon his judgment in leading the warriors far over the mountains to surprise an enemy. Chocorua loved this brave Wonalancet as he would his own son.

II

Among the chief's daughters his favorite was Wenonah, the youngest of his family, and the most beautiful maiden in the whole tribe. She was tall, straight and graceful as the willow. When she smiled her countenance sent forth such sunshine and brightness that it seemed as though the Great Spirit himself was among them.

This fair maiden had been admired by all the braves of the tribe, but she had been blind to their looks of admiration and heeded not their flattering advances.

One warrior was there among them, however, to whom her smiles were sweeter and her manner more gracious than to the

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

others, and it was with much pleasure and satisfaction that Chief Chocorua noted the friendliness which existed between his daughter and Wonalancet, his favorite warrior.

One day one of the tribe returned from a three days' hunt, and immediately sought Chocorua, saying:

"Oh Chief, during my travels of yesterday I have seen the smoke of camp-fires far to the south and in order to learn who the intruders might be I have journeyed thence. As I crept nearer I saw people different from our people and heard words different from ours."

Chief Chocorua stood for a long time in meditation before answering. Then he questioned the brave still further in regard to the appearance of the new enemy who had come to disturb the peacefulness of the Penacooks. At last he seemed satisfied and immediately determined upon the course he was to pursue.

No doubt was there in the mind of Chocorua as to who this new tribe was that

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

had intruded upon their hunting-ground. At different times word had been brought to him of a pale-faced people who had landed on the shore far to the south, and who had killed many braves with weapons which were entirely strange to them. These people had driven the Indians from the seashore, frightened their game far into the forest, and had even cut down large trees, making themselves wigwams from them. Now they had encroached upon the sacred domains of the Penacooks, and revenge must be had swiftly and surely.

Immediately he called a council of war, and from far and near came the braves to that council, wondering why they were so hurriedly summoned. When all were assembled, Chocorua arose to address his warriors, and as he stood there looking about him, straighter and statelier than ever, anger blazing forth from his eyes, with suppressed excitement, he said:

“My children, the brave Ogundah returns from the hunt and brings tidings of a new people whom he has seen far to the

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

south. They cut down the forests which sheltered our ancestors, they kill the deer and other game, and moreover these people have killed many of our cousins in the far south. Now they have come to destroy the woods of the Penacooks and to kill our own warriors and their families."

The braves gazed at each other in amazement. They had heard of the new people who had come from far over the water, driving the Indians inland, and now they were coming to the home of the Penacooks, to drive them from their hunting-grounds. Up rose Wonalancet, and in a voice of thunder cried:

"Oh Chief Chocorua, this pale-faced enemy is more to be feared than the Mohawks. We must swoop down upon them, drive them away and avenge the death of our kindred."

The words of the young brave aroused the Penacooks from the surprise which had taken possession of them at the thought of the white man so near, and each felt that the words of Wonalancet were true.

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

“My brother has spoken well,” said Chocorua. “The time has come to avenge the wrongs of the past. Be prepared for the march when the sun rises on the morrow. Chocorua himself will lead the attack on this our most hated and dreaded enemy.”

With these words of their chief the braves knew the meeting was at an end, and each went silently and quickly to his wigwam to prepare himself for the march.

III

Now the heart of Wonalancet had been heavy with doubt for some time, and the thought of going on the war-path without seeing Wenonah seemed too much for him to bear. He set out at once for the wigwam of Chocorua, and when the fair Wenonah appeared he approached her with outstretched arms, crying:

“Oh Light of the Moon, promise me that when the pale-face is driven far away, and the brave Penacooks return from the war-path, that you will come to the wigwam of

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

Wonalancet to preside over his camp-fire and to bring him happiness.”

Straightway Wenonah replied:

“When Wonalancet returns from the war-path, and brings news that the white man has been driven far away, then will Wenonah gladly come to the wigwam of Wonalancet.”

Wonalancet departed with joy in his heart. At daybreak a band of two hundred Indians filed noiselessly from their camp in the direction of the south. For two days they proceeded on their trail. Then scouts informed Chocorua that they had seen the smoke of the camp-fire of the pale-faces, and had even crept near enough to see the inmates of that camp.

A smile appeared on the face of Chocorua as he learned this, and he said:

“That is well! When darkness comes we will make our attack.”

Little did the people of the settlement dream of what awaited them as they went to their beds that night. Theirs had been a hard life for the past six months, and each

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

succeeding day seemed to bring forth new problems with which to grapple. Six months before they had left the settlement near the seashore and had gone northward, looking for a place to make new homes for themselves and their families.

At last, after a long, hard tramp, during which they suffered many hardships, they had cast their lot on the southern shore of the beautiful Lake Winnepesaukee.

The meadows in the lowlands were very fertile, and assured them provision for all the needs of life; here they had turned their energies to the building of a settlement.

On this same day, which was Sunday, while the Indians were in hiding, waiting darkness in order to make their attack, they had offered up their prayer of thanksgiving for the good fortune which they had enjoyed. They had now been there for several months, and not having been molested by Indians, had ceased to take any precaution against an attack.

Suddenly, in the dead of the night,

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

sounded the blood-curdling war-cry of the Penacook Indians.

In what seemed but a moment the settlement was ablaze, as the Indians applied the torch to first one log cabin and then another. Panic-stricken the people fled from them only to be attacked on all sides by the savages, some being killed, others injured. The settlers fought back fiercely and the Indians, evidently satisfied, retired as suddenly and as silently as they had come.

When the white men were convinced that their enemy was not lurking in the vicinity, they turned their attention to quenching the fires which had been set and caring for the dead and wounded.

When they came to the house of one Robert Mackay they found that a worse fate had befallen Gordon Mackay, his hunchbacked brother.

Now Robert Mackay had been out for two days on a trapping expedition and had left his younger brother at the cabin. No fear had he for Gordon when he set off on

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

this trip. Next morning the trapper returned only to find his home in ashes, no trace of his brother, and the settlement in general panic. Great was the wrath of Robert Mackay and fearful was he lest a fate worse than death might have befallen Gordon. He decided to go in immediate pursuit of the hostile Indians, hoping to be able to rescue his brother.

A party was soon formed for the pursuit of the Indians. Grief-stricken over the events of the past twenty-four hours, and knowing full well the torture which the Indians so often inflicted upon their victims, Robert was absorbed by one desire—to rescue Gordon if he were still alive, or to avenge his death if his life had been taken.

They bade the remaining settlers farewell, and sadly filed away from the settlement, fully equipped for a long and hazardous journey.

All day they followed the trail, with hardly a word spoken, except those of encouragement to their brave leader. When they arrived at the place where the Indians

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

had camped the previous night, they found a piece of cloth lodged by the wind among the blackberry bushes. This convinced them of two things: Gordon Mackay was a prisoner of the Penacooks and up to the night before was still alive.

Starting before daybreak the following morning, they pressed on more eagerly than ever. When they came to the spot where the Indians had camped the second night, they stood horrified at the sight before them. Securely lashed to a tree was the corpse of Gordon Mackay; the bruised body testifying to the cruel treatment which had been his since his captivity. The Indians had evidently found traveling with him as a prisoner very slow, and decided to rid themselves of this hindrance. Now the desire for revenge burned more fiercely in the heart of Robert Mackay.

The white men tenderly laid the remains of Gordon Mackay at rest, and once more turned their faces toward the north, on their countenances a look of grim determination. They made even better progress than

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

on the previous days. When night overtook them they were not far from the enemy, who had now rejoined their tribesmen encamped on the shore of a small lake.

IV

There was great rejoicing at the Indian camp upon the return of the victorious warriors, and Wonalancet had straightway gone to claim Wenonah as his bride. Plans for an immediate wedding were made and they were married according to the customs of their tribe.

As the ceremony was performed Chocorua, feeling greatly pleased at the events of the past few days, gave himself up to the joyousness of the occasion and was the leader in the festivities. Never before had there been such a general celebration of the tribe and the revelry lasted until far into the night.

The white men, alarmed at the nearness of the Indian camp, dared not build a fire lest the smoke should be seen by the In-

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

dians; therefore, while some slept the others remained on watch, fearing lest the redskins might have become aware that they were being followed.

At daybreak the white men were amazed at the beauty of the scene which confronted them. Less than a mile away was a mountain the like of which they had never before seen. It was steeper and more rugged than any of the others, and was covered with a heavy growth of trees which extended to within a hundred feet of the summit, and there ceased. From this line upward it was one solid bed of rock, free from vegetation and so steep that it seemed impossible to reach the peak from this direction. As they gazed in wonder at the beauty of the scene before them, they were still further amazed to see the form of a redskin appear at the very peak. He seemed to be scanning the horizon, and the settlers now knew that this lone Indian was scouting for signs of an enemy's camp-fire.

As they watched the sentinel on the mountain-top the idea came to them, if

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

they could only get to this high lookout, they might easily sight the Indians' camp and determine upon their plan of attack; accordingly they worked their way around to the back of this mountain* and, after a hard climb, at last found themselves near the summit.

It was now nearly sunset and as the settlers stopped to rest, closely surveying the camp below, they were surprised by sounds of someone climbing up the side of the mountain. The same thought came into each mind,—the sentinel of the morning was returning to resume his vigil.

No sooner had they concealed themselves than the sinewy figure of an Indian was seen climbing up in their direction. He came fearlessly along, his sharp eyes always on the alert and the white men feared lest he should become aware of their presence. He passed by, however, without detecting them and continued to the bare crest

* The course taken by the white men in climbing the mountain was that which is now known as the Piper Trail, and the view from this approach is most fascinating and awe-inspiring.

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

where he stopped and carefully scanned the surrounding country in all directions.

Suddenly he stopped as though he heard something down over the cliff on the side opposite to the one from which he had come. He worked his way noiselessly to the edge of the cliff and cautiously peered over the side. Drawing back, he quickly took his bow and as he carefully fitted the arrow into its place a look of anticipation spread over his countenance.

The white men, looking on, knew that some animal was feeding below and that the Indian was sure of his quarry. When everything was fitted to suit the hunter, he again approached the edge and, taking careful aim, sent the arrow on its mission. This was followed by the sound of an animal rearing up. The crash which followed, as well as the exultant smile of the Indian, showed that his aim had been true. He dropped his bow and arrow and, drawing his tomahawk, started to climb over the cliff to finish his work.

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

V

Realizing that this was their opportunity, the white men noiselessly worked their way to the cliff and peered over. About twenty feet below, on a shelf * about fifteen feet wide and extending toward the front of the mountain, lay the dead body of a large buck, and the Indian had just finished cutting its throat. Below, the mountain sloped so diagonally that it was impossible for man or beast to descend, and the west side was blocked by a huge boulder at least fifteen feet in diameter, which seemed to balance there, threatening at any moment to topple over into the gorge below.

There were but two exits from the spot, the one toward the front, the other up the side of the cliff. Some of the men covered the front passage; the others guarded the path recently taken by the hunter.

It was agreed between them that when

* The illustration on the cover of this Legend shows a partial view of this narrow shelf, as well as the huge boulder, which is now called the Balance Rock, from which Chocorua leaped.

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

both exits were covered they would close in upon the Indian and capture him, but that they would not shoot except as a last resort, for the noise of the guns would give the alarm to the Indian camp, and once they were warned the lives of the white men would be in great danger.

Mackay and his companion crept along the cleft as near as possible to the hunter who was busily engaged removing the skin from his game, and as they boldly stepped out into view with their guns levelled at the Indian, the white men on top of the cliff at the same time did likewise.

The startled redskin looked in dismay from one to the other. With his bow and arrow on the top of the crest, he was left with nothing but his tomahawk to defend himself, and he realized his helplessness against his white foe.

They went forward to make him a prisoner, but that was not to be. The Indian took a few hurried steps toward the top of the mountain and, turning, leaped onto the huge boulder.

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

Then followed a deathlike stillness, which was at last broken by Robert Mackay who exclaimed, in a voice controlled with difficulty because of the anger which burned within him:

“Incarnate fiend! your time has come. Whether you be demon or devil, naught can save you now!”

Chocorua (for it was none other) realized that his time had come and that there was no escape. He took a hurried glance toward the top of the mountain as if hoping to find assistance from that quarter. Only the bare summit met his gaze, however, and he calmly turned and once more faced the white men. As if all the savage heroism of the Penacooks had rallied to his aid, he drew himself up to his full height, resembling a bronze statue upon his rocky pedestal. Venomous anger blazed forth from his eyes, his broad chest heaved with emotion and the muscles of his forehead stood out like whipcord.

For a moment he stood gazing intently at his foes; then taking a step backward

THE LEGEND OF CHOCORUA

he said in a voice ringing with scorn and defiance:

“Chocorua is unarmed, but still he defies the white man. He laughs at him, even as he laughs at death. Go to your pale-faces and tell them Chocorua died like a Penacook!”

Hurling this defiance at his enemies, Chocorua turned and leaped far over the brink. The crash which followed was evidence that the chieftain had made no idle boast. The settlers, at first stupefied by the suddenness of this act, at length rushed to the edge of the precipice and looked over. For a moment they stood spellbound, gazing into the abyss below; then, shouldering their guns they silently retraced their steps down the side of the mountain.*

* This mountain was later given the name of Chocorua and the grave of the old chieftain is said to be near the junction of the Liberty and Hammond trails, not far from the spot where he took the fatal leap.