

Turtle Island

A Dream of Peace

(Web-preview Version)

Jack Ramey

Springwood Press

Dedicated to

the spirit of

Leon Shenandoah

and the Iroquois people

*“What you call the United States,
we Indians call the Great Turtle Island.
This is where the Creator planted us
and when He did, He made us free.
Europeans were not planted here,
but you came here because
you wanted to be free like us.
In our original Instructions
we were told that
nobody owned the land
except the Creator.
That’s why we welcomed you.”*

Contents

Part I

Sorcerer's Moon 1

Part II

Journey to the East 159

Part III

The Planting Moon 287

Part I

Sorcerer's Moon

Chapter One

I first heard this story many years ago when I was a small boy on my grandfather's knee. He heard it from *his* grandfather, who heard it from his, and so on back into the dim reaches of time, back to one who was there. His name was Orios, and although he was only a boy at the time, he played the flute like no other in his day. They say he could charm the birds of the air and the creatures of the forest with the magic of his music. He saw these things happen, and here is the story that he told, a story that has echoed down throughout the generations.

It all began one summer morning in the land of the Onondaga, what you now call the lake region of the state of New York. Long before the white people came to our land, before the man called Columbus "discovered" Turtle Island and gave us all a new name: *los indios*. But we were not *indios*. We were Onondaga, the people. On this one summer morning, a morning that would forever change the lives of so many people—those living and those who would come to live on Great Turtle Island—a long, elm-bark canoe glided through the fog across a great silver lake. The sun was beginning to break through the early morning mist, leaving blood-red streaks in the V-shaped wake the canoe made on the lake's surface.

In the canoe sat the great chieftain of the Onondaga, Hiawatha. The muscles on his strong arms swelled with each stroke of the paddle slicing through the waters on either side of the canoe.

Hiawatha's symbol, a bright golden-yellow sun, was painted on either side of the curved prow of the canoe. A single eagle feather hung down across his back. He was naked except for a deerskin loincloth. The skin of his body gave off a brilliant *orenda*, a glow that bathed the other occupants of the canoe in its golden light. With Hiawatha on this early morning adventure were his treasures, his four daughters. Daughters born of a wife now gone, these girls were his comfort and solace.

Sovana, the oldest, reminded him most of Tamora, his gone wife. She sat upright in the prow of the canoe paddling in time with her father's strokes, a serious and determined look on her handsome face. Her strong arms moved within the folds of her fringed deerskin dress, a dress that had belonged to her mother. Hiawatha remembered the night he first met Tamora, how he was thunderstruck by her beauty and dignity, and now this fringed dress fit their first-born so well some thirteen years later. He had presented it to his eldest daughter five days ago, and Sovana had worn it ever since, proud of the memory of her mother, the newly developing curves of her woman's body fitting perfectly inside of the supple garment.

Between Hiawatha at the stern and Sovana at the prow, Seawa, Memoha, and Tiwi sat and reclined. Seawa, a girl of eleven summers, watched intently as an osprey dived into the water some thirty yards away and emerged with a writhing fish in its talons. The sight of the bird of prey's bloody claws and the dying fish gave her pause and made her think about the strange ways of the Great Creator. Tiwi, only five summers old and the youngest, leaned over her father's left leg and the edge of the canoe, dangling her hand in the water and watching the bubbles her tiny fingers made in the flow of red, blue, and white foam. She laughed in delight, and Hiawatha, as he smiled down on his smallest girl, thought that her bright laughter sounded like the ripples of the shining lake water. He looked up from his reverie and scanned the horizon. The fog had lifted, making the distant shore visible. Memoha, nine years old and full of curiosity and

raw energy, held her small black-and-white spotted dog and, pointing at the shore, turned to look at her father.

Hiawatha nodded at his daughter as the sweet vibrato from a cedar-wood flute broke through the silence of the morning air. Sovana turned in the direction of the sound, her large brown eyes searching through the lifting fog. An expression of rapt attention molded the delicate features of her smooth and beautiful face.

"Orios," she half sighed, half whispered. An unmistakable note of longing colored her voice.

Hiawatha smiled. "Orios," he whispered in mock secrecy to the other girls. "Orios, the dreamer, Orios, the charming music maker."

"His music is wonderful," sighed Sovana. She absently placed her hand on her breast as she peered through the fog. She was a radiant young girl, one of those rare creatures whose mere presence could light up a longhouse on a dark winter night. Her face gave off a silver light and her voice was as pleasant to hear as a songbird's trill.

Another canoe appeared behind them. Makahwah, large and sturdy matriarch of Hiawatha's longhouse and the Turtle Clan, sat in the middle of the canoe with Orios, a slender youth of fourteen playing delicate, romantic airs on his flute. The notes seem to glide on the morning air like winged creatures, and the birds on the shore answered his song, making intricate harmonic patterns ebb and flow in counterpoint around the two gliding canoes.

Kewahtawa, Makahwah's husband, stopped paddling for a moment and scanned the horizon through the slits of narrowed eyes whose corners were as creased with lines as the wrinkled brow below his thick silver hair. Kewahtawa's cousin, Teom, a lean, middle-aged man with a narrow face and twin braids that fell down either side of his thin chest, rested his paddle across the struts of the prow and smiled at the girls in the other canoe. Sovana pretended not to notice Orios.

"Look, Grandmother. We are almost there." Memoha pointed her puppy's nose in the direction of the distant shore. "Can you smell the strawberries from here, little puppy? I can!"

“What a keen nose you have, my child,” said Makahwah. She shifted her weight in the canoe, and the bark vessel rocked from side to side. Orios played a few comical notes and Tiwi giggled. Sovana looked up and smiled. Orios looked shyly at Sovana, basking in her approval, but too nervous to keep his eyes locked with hers. Makahwah flipped him on the head with her index finger and pointed to the shore, now glowing in the bright morning sun.

“Keep your eyes away from my granddaughter,” she said. “We’ve work to accomplish this day.” Kewahtawa and Teom dipped their paddles in the water, and the canoe moved closer to the approaching lake shore. Hiawatha laughed to himself at his mother-in-law and her no-nonsense approach to life: an approach however, that had helped them survive many a hard winter.

Among our people, power is passed down from mother to daughter. The women own the longhouses and decide which man is fittest to rule, to lead the people in times of great need or in times of calm. Makahwah was a very powerful woman. Her man, Kewahtawa, was once the chief of the Onondaga, but a blood feud with the Seneca caused the death of Tamora, her daughter by her first husband, and Makahwah forced him to step aside for Hiawatha. It is the women who pass the power down from generation to generation. And why not? Do they not give birth to all men and women? This is why the Corn Goddess is not a man. Why the fruits of the earth are sisters, and the growing vines that come back each year are tended by women who know best the ways of birth and death and birth again.

As the sun lifted up over the lake, turning the world to gold, Hiawatha looked behind him and saw the rest of the hunting and gathering party approaching in nine long canoes, gliding in a silver V-formation. Today the men would hunt the deer and the elk, the turkey and the rabbit, while the women would gather the fruits of the earth, the rich berries and herbs of the summer lakeside forest. He half-turned and signaled with his outstretched paddle high above his head for one group of canoes to split to the right side of the shore, and the other group to follow the left. Half of the canoes veered off

toward the lush tangle of green brush and tree trunks that marked the beginning of a great forest. The other half veered to the right shore, where a steep incline led up to a large expanse of meadow covered with flowers and dotted with fruit-bearing bushes.

Hiawatha felt the bow and deerskin quiver beside his left leg on the floor of his canoe and his heart was filled with desire for the hunt. He silently said a prayer to the deer spirits to be generous to his people; he said a prayer to the spirits of the forest to guide his footsteps, and to make them silent; he said a prayer to the spirits of the sky and wind to hide his scent and the scent of his companions from the quick nostrils of the deer and the elk; and he prayed to the spirit of his dead wife, Tamora, to look down from the otherworld and smile on today's endeavors.

Memoha's spotted puppy yelped and howled as the canoe scraped the bottom of the shore. Hiawatha stepped over the side into the shallow water and pulled the boat onto dry land. He helped little Tiwi out while Sovana and Seawa gathered the woven baskets from the floor and stepped ashore to join Makahwah, who was stretching her large limbs in the bright morning sun. Memoha was right, she thought. You can smell the strawberries on the wind. Her keen sense of smell told her that pokeberry and yarrow flowered nearby as well. These would be gathered today to make poultices, salves, and headache medicines. Orios and Sovana walked off together toward the winding path that led up the hill to the meadow. He wanted to speak to her, but he could not. There were so many things he needed to tell her, but the words would not come. Instead, he withdrew his flute from its doeskin sheath and began to play a sweet melody. Sovana drew closer to him.

"Orios!" Hiawatha's strong voice commanded the boy's attention. He turned and lowered his flute.

"Yes, Hiawatha?"

"Today you will come with me. We will hunt together in the company of men." Orios' cheeks colored. He glanced at Sovana, nodded goodbye, then ran back down the hillside. In his haste, he

tripped on a rock and tumbled head over heels, landing at Makahwah's feet. She grabbed him by the ear and pulled him up. He checked to make sure that his flute was not broken; then, reassured, he ran to Hiawatha's side. Hiawatha put his arm around the boy's shoulders.

"If you want to earn the respect of your people, my son, you must first become a hunter." He led Orios to his canoe. Ever since Orios' father had died four years ago, Hiawatha had tried to fill the void left in the boy's life. Orios had been especially close to his father since his mother had died during his birth.

"Will you teach me to be a great hunter like you?"

"I will do my best, Orios."

"If I become a great hunter like you, then will I gain the hand of Sovana?"

"I think you already have my daughter's heart, Orios. But Makahwah has final say. First gain the trust of Makahwah, and then you will have Sovana as your bride."

"Why doesn't Makahwah like me?"

"She likes you." Hiawatha pushed the canoe off the bank and jumped in the back. He tossed a paddle to Orios up front and motioned him to get moving. "She loves your music. We all love your music. But she is afraid that you will not be a good provider for her granddaughter and the people of her longhouse."

"But why?"

"Because you walk in the woods with your head in the clouds."

"Today I will show her what a great hunter I am!" He pulled a short blowgun out of a fawnskin pouch hanging from a rawhide thong around his neck. "Today I will kill a giant rabbit. A rabbit so great that it will feed the entire longhouse. Its pelt will be so thick it will keep four babies warm on the coldest of winter nights. And everyone will look at the giant rabbit and wonder aloud: 'What great hunter has brought us this giant rabbit? Who is the great man to thank for this gift?' And Makahwah will look at them and say: Orios,

Orios of the enchanted flute, has brought this giant rabbit for all to enjoy."

Hiawatha laughed and splashed Orios with a forward slap of his paddle. "What a dreamer you are!"

After a short journey around the edge of the lake, Hiawatha steered the canoe toward the shore. They leapt out and pulled the canoe onto the dry bank. "This is the best summer deer trace in all the land of the Onondaga. Now we will do some real hunting."

Hiawatha led the way down the narrow track into the deep forest. He stopped suddenly. With his deerskin moccasin, he kicked aside the black pebbles of fresh deer spoor. He looked up at Orios. "A buck. Very close." He put his forefinger to his lips. Orios nodded.

They continued on down the path, a path so overhung with a canopy of majestic broad-leaved trees that the shaded ferns were as high as a man's waist. Orios froze in his tracks when he saw through the massive trunks a ten-point buck standing still, looking directly at them. Orios could hear the pounding of his own heart beating within his head. Hiawatha drew a shaft from his buckskin quiver, fitted the hand-carved notch onto his bowstring, pulled the length back to his right cheek, and let go—letting the arrow fly through the forest with a quiet whistling sound. The buck leaped to his right, three feet into the air, and Hiawatha's shaft found its mark just behind the left shoulder, sharpened flint piercing his lungs in mid-flight. The mortally hurt deer ploughed on through the woods for some twenty paces and then hit the ground head-first, the mighty rack of antlers tossing up dirt and dead pine needles.

Man and boy moved in silence to where the once-majestic buck lay beside a tall white pine, his eyes wide and lifeless, his neck twisted. His clouded eyes seemed to Orios to be fixed on him alone. The sight of this dead lord of the forest sent a shiver down his spine. Hiawatha dropped to his knees and motioned for Orios to do the same. He placed his right hand on the buck's shoulder, his fingers straddling the upright shaft of the arrow.

"Forgive us, brother, for this deed we have done today. We are in great need of your meat." Hiawatha's mellifluous baritone filled the cathedral of woods. "We love the life-spirit that once coursed through your blood-paths, the same life-spirit that runs through the blood-paths of all of our people. Thank you for giving us your life, your blood, so that our lives may continue."

A soft wind whistled through the white pine, making a sound like the voices of winged Spirit Beings whispering above him. Orios watched him as he bowed his head and remained still in silent meditation. Then he lifted his head and turned to Orios.

"Bring me that flat piece of bark over there."

When Orios returned with the piece of wood, Hiawatha was unpacking the contents of a small bundle that he had removed from his fawnskin pouch. He took some tobacco from a smaller pouch and sprinkled it on the flat piece of bark. Next, he assembled his fire drill, a small bow with a short, pointed shaft. He looped the string of the bow once around the shaft, placed the point of the drill-shaft on the piece of bark in the middle of the mound of dried tobacco, and began to move the bow back and forth, causing the pointed drill to spin. After a few minutes of rapid spinning, a small plume of smoke drifted up from the mound of tobacco. Orios kneeled over the drill and blew on the small flames. The tobacco caught and Hiawatha added a bit more, causing the aromatic blue smoke to drift heavenward. Hiawatha wafted some toward his face and then toward the face of the buck. He began to chant softly in a rich, deep voice. He spread his arms outward and upward.

"We burn the sacred tobacco to your memory. We offer the holy plant-smoke to your ghost. We honor your strength. We honor your beauty. We honor your brave heart and pure mind. Each time we pass this place, we will remember you, you who gave yourself to us that we might live. Each time we pass this place, we will honor your spirit."

Orios looked up at Hiawatha with admiration. He had found something else about his chieftain to love and respect. And something

that he already knew, something that all of the people knew, was reinforced in his mind and heart that day—the creatures of the forest are our brothers and sisters, and, as such, we must treat them with dignity and respect. Those who are killed are giving of themselves; they make a blood sacrifice so that their brothers and sisters, the people, the Onondaga, may live.

Hiawatha stood up and slowly withdrew the arrow from the buck's side. With his stone knife, he field-dressed the deer, and then tied the forelegs together and the hind legs together with two pieces of rawhide. He slung the heavy weight up onto his broad shoulders. They walked back down the path the way they had come to put the still warm buck into the canoe. As they turned around a bend in the narrow path, Hiawatha spied a huge brown hare, frozen on an open stretch of meadow.

"Look, Orios," he whispered softly. "Here is your gigantic rabbit! Take my bow." Hiawatha dropped the gutted buck and gave Orios his bow and quiver. Sensing danger that a mere frozen attitude could not overcome, the hare turned and bounded off across the meadow in the direction of the trees. Orios gave chase, trying to fit an arrow into the bowstring while he ran at full speed. The hare was fast, but Orios would not quit and he kept him in sight.

Hiawatha laughed to himself and continued down the path toward the lake shore. A sudden gust of wind blew across the treetops and the meadow. Crows called in the distance. The wind blew hair into Orios' eyes and he stumbled over a rock in the meadow. He picked himself up and continued running toward the woods where his elusive prey had just entered.

The hare was now out of sight, but Orios knew he would find him. It was his fate, his destiny. He had dreamed of it. He had spoken of it to Hiawatha. And now the great opportunity was put before him. As he ran, he said a quick prayer to the spirits of this wood, and then, twenty feet before him, he saw the hare standing in the shade, large coal-black eyes unblinking, trying to blend in with the grass and the

tree trunks. He ducked behind the trunk of a tall oak tree, catching his breath and hugging the bow and arrow to his slim chest.

The spirits of the woods were about to answer Orios' prayer, but not in the way that he had wished for. His destiny and his fate were indeed waiting for him in the strange guise of this timid dweller of the forest. Someone else was also stalking this rabbit. A boy about the same age as Orios, a boy also hidden behind the trunk of another tree on the other side of the rabbit. This boy could have been Orios' twin, his other, his long-lost brother. As his twin was fitting a dart onto his blowgun and praying to the spirits of the woods to guide his missile to the heart of the hare, Orios fitted the notch of the arrow onto the string and pulled the bow back as far as he could. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and his hands were shaking with apprehension. As in a dream, or in a vision of two split worlds, two dual universes that come together for an instant, both boys stepped out from behind the trees on either side of the clearing. Orios' eyes were fixed on the frozen hare caught between two worlds, hung between two realities. A crow cawed loudly and a black shadow fell across the meadow.

Orios let the arrow loose. It whistled through the summer air like an emissary of doom. It howled like a broken truce. The boy on the other side of the field looked up in time to see what looked like a black hawk's face screaming toward him, yellow eyes becoming larger and larger and brighter and brighter, red and gold feathers fanning out in concentric circles around his crowned and radiating head, the twin slashes on either side of the golden beak bleeding out blood in steady twin streams that poured out behind him, that vibrated all around him, huge gold and red-tipped talons rushing forward now only three feet from his face, and that was the last sight he saw as the arrow struck his chest.

The impact hurled him backwards to the ground and from out of his mouth there came a loud and piercing cry that sounded like an angry raven. Orios dropped the bow and ran toward the stricken boy. He reached his side and dropped down to his knees. He did not know

what to do. He put his hand on the boy's chest. Should he pull the arrow out? He tried, but he could not remove it. He looked at his hands covered with blood. Was he dead? He placed his ear next to the boy's mouth, but he could not hear any breathing. The boy's eyes stared at him, but did not see him.

Orios leaped to his feet, blinded by tears that suddenly welled up in his eyes. He turned and ran back the way he came, his legs racing down the path to the lake shore, his mind burning, full of confused images.

"Hiawatha! Hiawatha!" he shouted as he saw the figure of the great leader leaning over the canoe at the edge of the lake in the distance. Hiawatha turned and saw the boy running toward him. Knowing that something was wrong, he grabbed his stone tomahawk from the bottom of the canoe and ran to meet Orios.

"What is it, Orios?" Hiawatha held the boy's arms with his strong hands and felt his slim body trembling. Orios could not speak. He gestured back toward the meadow. His mouth was open, but no words came. Hiawatha shook him. "Take a deep breath, Orios."

Orios managed to breathe in deeply. And then the words came in a rush. "A boy in the meadow. I think I have killed him. It was an accident. I thought he was the rabbit, or the rabbit was there and then he was gone, and the boy was falling with my arrow in his chest . . ."

"Show me," said Hiawatha. And the two of them ran back down the path. When they reached the boy's side, he was already dead. His glazed-over, open eyes gazed sightlessly at the clear blue sky, a look of surprise frozen on his young face. Hiawatha pulled the arrow from his chest and placed his hand on the wound. Blood spurted around and through his fingers as he chanted softly a prayer to the Great Spirit, to the keeper of dead souls in the otherworld, a prayer for the dead boy, a stranger hunting on strange soil.

"Seneca," he said, looking at the markings on the blowgun that lay on the ground a few feet away.

"It was an accident, Hiawatha. I didn't mean to kill him. Suddenly he was there."

“Yes, of course it was an accident. This boy was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Seneca should not be hunting here this time of year. These are the hunting grounds of the Onondaga.”

Suddenly, a dart whizzed by Hiawatha’s head. He dove for cover, dragging Orios with him. They flattened themselves on the ground among tall weeds and grasses. Hiawatha raised his head slightly and peered through a parting in the grass. Another dart landed beside him, and a loud, crow-like call pierced the still air. Hiawatha saw a painted Seneca warrior on the other side of the clearing, head shaved on either side of a high brush-cut fixed with quills. Hiawatha signaled for Orios to run. The boy half-crouched and ran through the tall grass toward the path that led to the canoe. Hiawatha followed. More crow-calls answered the first. More darts whizzed past them, one of them grazing Hiawatha’s arm.

He skidded to a full stop, wheeled, and faced his enemy. The blood pumped wildly through his veins. He felt the strange thrill that always overtook him when he was forced to do battle. Twenty feet away, the Seneca warrior was running at full tilt, placing a dart in his blowgun. Hiawatha quickly removed the stone tomahawk from his belt, took aim, and hurled the oblong stone fitted into the smooth shaft of ash. The deadly missile flipped end over end over end so rapidly that the Seneca had no time to dodge or duck, and it smashed into his forehead with a loud crack, sending a shower of blood and brain out and around his split skull, stopping the man dead in his tracks. He dropped to his knees, and then pitched forward face-first onto the ground, blood pouring out of his nose, his eyes, his ears, and the hole in his forehead.

Hiawatha, exultant, screamed a loud victory cry to warn any other enemies that a mighty warrior was here waiting to deal with all comers. He picked up his tomahawk and freed the blowpipe from clenched fingers. He ripped the bracelet of snake fangs from the fallen enemy’s wrist. Trophies of battle that would hang in his longhouse. Two more crow calls split the air.

At the far edge of the meadow, lying in the grass, two Seneca warriors with long blowguns watched Hiawatha turn and jog down the path. Both had shaved heads, save for red-dyed topknots braided with porcupine quills. Their naked limbs were streaked with black and red dye and they both wore snake-fang bracelets on their wrists. One had a nose ring made of hammered gold; the other wore large mica earrings that flashed blue and green in the sun whenever he moved his head. They looked at each other, acknowledging their enemy's strength.

When Hiawatha was out of sight, they crept out of their hiding and rushed to their dead companion's side. The warrior with the nose ring placed his hand on the fallen warrior's heart and chanted a prayer-song to the Great Spirit of the otherworld to take the ghost of their brother into his arms. He sprinkled tobacco on the dead man's bloody head. The other warrior nudged him abruptly. Irritated at being interrupted, he turned to see his companion pointing to the dead body of the boy lying some twenty paces away. They rushed over and dropped to their knees beside the dead boy, brushing the flies away from his open eyes and the blood on his chest.

"It cannot be!"

"But it is. Young Mahtewan." They stared at each other in disbelief.

"Look!" He picked up Hiawatha's bloody arrow that lay beside the dead boy.

"Onondaga."

The man with the nose ring picked up the dead boy and slung him over his shoulder. He had to tell Shadahgoh, war chief of the Seneca nation that his only son was dead. Slain by an Onondaga arrow. It was not a task he was anxious to perform.