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The Man Who Plucked the Gorbey: A Maine Woods Legend

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EDWARD D. IVES

The Man Who Plucked the Gorbey: A Maine Woods Legend

THE Canada Jay labors under the official name of *perisoreus canadensis canadensis* but it is more commonly called gorbey, moose-bird, meat-bird, grease-bird, Whiskey Jack, Whiskey John, Hudson Bay bird, caribou bird, venison hawk, grey jay, woodsman's friend, or camp robber.¹ Maine woodsmen usually call it either gorbey or moose-bird. It is a native of the northern coniferous forests, which means that it is found all through Canada but only in the northernmost areas of the northernmost states of the Union. In the Northeast, it is found in northern Maine and over most of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Ernest Thompson Seton said it looked like "a magnified chickadee": it is a little larger than a robin and has thick, grey furry feathers over most of its body save for a white throat and forehead and a black cap. It will eat absolutely anything. It will peck at a deer carcass, steal bait out of traps, make off with soap and candles that have been left around a camp, and the Indians claim it will even eat moccasins and fur caps. It is a great hoarder and has a stomach that is bottomless. One story tells of a camp cook who threw out some stale doughnuts, only to see a gorbey fly down, put his left foot through one doughnut, his right foot through another, grab yet another with his beak, and thus make off to a nearby tree with three doughnuts. Over and over I have had woodsmen tell me how these birds would appear around a lunch-ground deep in the woods. There would only be a couple the first day, but more and more would gather as time went on, and they got so tame that they would sit on your knee or shoulder, eat out of your hand, or, if you were not careful, steal food right off your plate.

There are numerous stories about the gorbey. A ballad, "Tom Cray," local to northern Maine, celebrates the demise of a woodsman who worked on a log landing: "He started for the landing, one morning quite late,/ But little did he think of his terrible fate,/ When down came two bluejays, a garbey and took/ The poor little landing-man on Beaver Brook." And it warns us all as follows: "Now it's young folks take a warning, of the fowls be aware,/ Of the bluejays and the garbies that fly in the air;/ When you go out-a-walking, be armed and keep look/ For the bluejays and garbies upon Beaver Brook."²

Often in Maine I have heard the story that these little birds are the souls of dead woodsmen. While most informants have not wished to go this far, they have told me again and again that no woodsman will harm a gorbey in any way. Another belief is, as one informant told me, "Anything that you do to a garbie happens to you. . . . An exasperated woodsman kicked at one which was stealing his lunch and broke its leg; a day or so after that, the man got his foot caught in the trace-chain of a scoot and suffered a fractured leg." Another man threw a stick at one, broke its wing, and that afternoon he broke his arm. It is with a special version of this

sympathetic reaction that I wish to deal here: the story of the man who stripped the bird of its feathers.

Charles Sibley of Argyle, Maine, now well over seventy, had worked for many years in the lumberwoods around Moosehead Lake. On 30 November 1958, he told me the story this way:

Ives: You were telling me the other day about Archie Stackhouse.

Sibley: Yeah.

Ives: Now where did you know him?

Sibley: Well, he used to be wangan man up in the woods there, and he'd watch camp and tote-teams; he used to stay up there the year round. Well, this is the story they told. Now I don't know whether it's true or not. The only thing I know about it—he didn't have a spear of hair on his head no more than you in the palm of your hand. Not a bit. And they said he took a—one of these gorbies, these meat-birds, you know what them are. Well, he took one of them and he picked him, all but his wings. In February. Picked him all off, feathers all off him, all but just his wings, and he said, "Go, you son of a bitch, and get you a new coat." And they said the next morning when he woke up, his hair laid right on the pillow, every God-damned bit. Now, 'f they's any truth in that, I don't know, but I do know he didn't have any hair.

Angus Enman (*aet.* c. 75) now lives in Spring Hill, Prince Edward Island, but in his youth he worked in the woods of the Rangeley-Magalloway area of western Maine. On 18 August 1958, he told me the story as it had been told to him:

Ives: Did you ever hear the story about the fellow who pulled the feathers out of the bird?

Enman: Yeah, I heard the boys talking about that up in the woods. Oh, I never heard very much about it, you know. Up there, those moose-birds—you was lunchin' out, you know—they'd be thick, they'd be startin', they'd be right there, and they'd come right up on my feet. And, uh, there was an old fellow setting alongside of me one day, and I pretty near caught one. And he said, "Look," he said, "I could tell you a story about that." He said, "There was a bad fella, wicked sort of fella, and he caught one of the birds." And he said, "He picked the feathers off him and let him go in the cold of the winter. And he said, oh, he passed a remark—he was a wicked sort of a fella—he said, 'Let the old son of a bitch that put them on you grow them on again.'" He said, "He woke up in the morning baldheaded as could be." . . . That man told me that one day up there at the lunch-ground. . . . We was up in old Blue Mountain up back of Andover.

More often, though, the story is reduced to a single sentence, sometimes as simple a one as the following: "The story is that he had plucked a bird in the dead of winter and the next morning his hair was gone."

I had collected several versions of the story in my travels around Maine, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. Usually the man named was Archie Stackhouse and the locale was "across Moosehead Lake," until I was ready to title this paper, "The Legend of Archie Stackhouse." However, to check my findings, I wrote a letter asking for information on "the man who pulled the feathers off a bird and later lost all his hair," and I published it in every daily and weekly paper in Maine, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and northern New Hampshire and Vermont. As a further check, I published it in several of the larger papers in each of the

Canadian provinces and upstate New York. The result was a veritable avalanche of letters—over two hundred of them. Not all of them told me the story but almost every one had something helpful to say. I ought to add that I received only a couple of “wise-guy” letters (none of them very funny), three tracts, two offers to be pen-pals, but none of marriage. “Folklore by mail” has its drawbacks and limitations, but I think that in the present study it proved its usefulness.

I now have over one hundred versions of the story, varying in length from one sentence to several pages. Archie Stackhouse no longer occupies the center of the stage alone; he shares that place with twenty-eight others. All but one of the versions have Maine or New Brunswick for their locale.³ Within this area the story is widespread and homogeneous, but it centers in six areas, each with its own local “heroes.” Let us make a quick survey:

1. *The Upper Penobscot Basin.* Roughly, this area extends from Holeb through Moosehead Lake, Chesuncook Lake, Mount Katahdin to Millinocket. By far the largest number of stories, about a third of all I have collected, come from this area, and they almost invariably have Archie Stackhouse for the hero. One from Holeb mentions a Moses Comstock, while two more (located over near St. Zacharie on the Canadian border) name a Joseph Morin. Here also should be included the handful of versions that come from the Rangeley area.

2. *Eastern Maine between Lincoln and Danforth.* Roughly, this includes the Mattawamkeag-Baskahegan River basins. Here the hero, when he is named, is William Stinson.

3. *Northern Maine and Northwestern New Brunswick.* Perhaps this area should be divided in two, but the score of versions I have collected all come within an area of less than a hundred square miles. There are six different heroes here: Around Presque Isle, Maine, for example, he is always Leonard Ireland (or a variation of that name: Linwood Allen, etc.); in Fort Fairfield, Benny Teague. Across the New Brunswick line on the Tobique River, he is usually Henry Boone, although one version named a man known only as Hickey and another said the man was Wilfred Gray.

4. *The Miramichi Valley in New Brunswick.* More often than not, the hero is nameless here, but when he is named, he is Alex Martin, Alex Grady, or Joe Grady. A Richard Graves turns up in Newcastle Bridge, some twenty miles to the south, and since the headwaters of the Southwest Miramichi lie close to the Tobique, perhaps Wilfred Gray from that area also belongs in this group. All the names are close enough to make that idea attractive.

5. *Albert County, New Brunswick.* That is to say, the Moncton-Petitcodiac area. Out of the dozen versions I have from this area, Howard Beaman is almost always the man named. One version names a Millard Downing.

6. *York County, New Brunswick.* This area is a vague one, and the hero is generally nameless, except for one version from around Magaguadavic, where he is Bill Robson, and one from the Nashwaak valley, where he is Judson Estabrook. One version comes from as far south as Bocabec on the Bay of Fundy.

This completes the survey of the areas where the story is known. Aside from this change in the name of the hero, there are practically no differences in the stories told in the different areas; a detail found north of Moosehead Lake is likely as not to turn up just as often on the Miramichi or elsewhere. The only other significant area difference is that in the southernmost versions (those from around Lincoln and

Danforth in Maine and in Albert County in New Brunswick) birds like the blue-jay, robin, chickadee, and junco are often substituted for the gorbey, but here we are getting toward the southern edge of the gorbey's range. However, even north of Moosehead Lake and in Aroostook County, we find the bluejay and even the robin occasionally.

The story has numerous slight variants, many of them only elaborations. In most of the versions the man pulls out all of the feathers, but in eight he leaves the wing and tail feathers. One version has him burn the feathers off, while another has him put the living bird in the fire (in this particular version, the man himself is burned to death a short while afterward). Most of the versions do not report his saying anything when he releases the bird, but about twenty percent have him say something like "Fly to Jesus," or "Go to Hell and get a new suit," while only two (one of them Enman's) actually show him as "wicked," "Calling on God," as a man from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, reports it, "if he had the power he was credited with, to grow new feathers on the bird." Very few of the versions say anything about what the bird does, but eight have it fly straight up out of sight after being plucked. Seldom is the reaction of the rest of the crew mentioned, but when the storyteller does include it he always points out that they were horrified or, at least, uneasy.

The retribution almost always takes place "next morning," but some versions have it a few days, a week, or a month later, while one or two make it a point that the man received his punishment "before spring." Most of the versions just say that he lost all his hair, but some go into detail, adding "body hair," "eyebrows and eyelashes," "beard," and "even the hair from his nose and ears." An interesting detail that turns up in forty percent of the tales is the following: "And the next morning when he woke up all his hair was on his pillow." Many versions that tell the whole story in a sentence or two will still keep this one concrete detail. An interesting variant from the Nashwaak River says, "That man lost all of his hair within a year. If I remember right, on a hot day in summer he went to the spring for a drink of water and dipped his head in and all his hair came out." Two versions say nothing at all about the man losing all his hair, one simply stating "That night the man died," while the other says, "Hickey was drowned about a year after on the drive on Pokiok Stream. The story was that a squirrel was the cause of the drowning." About eighty percent of the stories stop here, but some follow through, adding that the man was forced to leave camp or that he always wore a hat, "even to meals."

A version from Monmouth, Maine, leads into the story in an interesting way:

It happened on the Tobique River in Northern N.B. The bird was called a gorby. An old woodsman wouldn't hurt one. Sometimes play tricks on them by tossing out a piece of hot bun toasted over the fire and the first bird that got it got a hot beak and then would fly up in a tree and scold and it sounded as if they were saying "Jesus Jesus." . . . This man thinking he was doing something smart held one and picked all the feathers off but the wing feathers and tail feathers and tossed it into the air and said, "Now fly to your Jesus bareassed." The others predicted something drastic would happen to him and the next morning when he lifted up his head all his hair was left on his heading which might have been his bag of clothes called a turkey, a folded jacket, or a bunch of fir boughs. He left the crew soon after.

I might add that several people mentioned this matter of the bird's cries sounding like "Jesus." The late Herbert Rice, woodsman, of Bangor, claimed that when

Archie Stackhouse held the bird in his hand it was saying, "Cold, oh Jesus, cold!" while another man remarks that after being plucked "the jack ran off hollering, 'Oh, it's chilly, bejesus!'"

I would like now to quote one version entire, both because it contains interesting details not found in other versions and because it is well told. It was sent me by Mr. A. Richard, 58, of Brunswick, Maine, "as it was told us when we were kids by my grandfather as a bedtime story."

In a large logging camp in the Maine woods, a crew of loggers were chopping for a logging company and under the leadership of a very cruel and brutal man named John? ? [sic] who was known to be able to beat up five to six men any time at the least provoking word or act. One night or early morning during a severe snow storm the men were in camp drinking or playing cards not having been able to even step outside the doors for three days. These men used to very active work were all in a very bad temper, but none so bad as Big John the camp boss; and Pierre LeBlanc, the camp cook, who was the smallest man in camp and who was always stating that some day he Pierre would beat the life out of Big John, to which all would joke about; on this particular stormy night Big John was sitting by a window, when a little corberie came to peck on the window pane wanting to be let in out of the cold. Big John opened the window, and taking the corberie in, proceeded to clean off every last feather; then tossing the bird back in the cold night. The men stared in frightful awe at this cruel act, none daring to speak a word except little Pierre. Pierre, tiny alongside Big John, stepped in front of the cruel man and denounced him as only a Frenchman can do and then made his last threat to Big John. "John you big brute, some day you will wake up and you will also be plucked clean of every last hair on your body."

In the early morning the men were awakened by an awful moan. Then tramping on the floor getting out of bed they saw an awful sight; Big John the cruel and the brute of all the logging camps was pacing the floor stark naked, and as hairless as the little bird had been featherless. At this time little Pierre came from his kitchen and taking one look at Big John said, "Now you big strong brutal animal, God has punished you, but not the way Pierre is going to do." And with that he proceeded to give the big man the most unholy beating anyone had ever witnessed and every man stood rooted to the floor unable to stop Pierre until Big John was whimpering and crying like a baby. When Big John was revived Pierre fixed him a lunch and ordered him out of the camp with the warning never to return.

From that day on no man in the Maine and New Brunswick camps would work for the once big woods boss, so the company passed a rule that Big John would have the rights to food and lodging for one night at any of their camps and Big John earned his keep going from camp to camp, not daring to stay more than one night and making reports to the logging company on location of good wood lots that could be had for logging.

As might be expected, a good many of the narrators were skeptical, not wanting me to think that they believed the story. A great many more were simply doubtful. Both groups were apt to add something like, "At least that's the way it was told to me." On the other hand, I was not prepared for anything like the number of people who claimed to believe the story. Even if I discount as simple narrative devices a handsome percentage of such affidavits as, "That really happened, sir," or "That's not a story, that's a fact," (and a small percentage should probably be discounted as ploys in the great American game of "Let's-hoax-the-folklorist"), I am still left with

enough evidence to show that the story is often believed to be true. I have only one letter from anyone who claims to have been an eyewitness, but many of the letters quote sources that are, or were certainly believed to be, unexceptionable: "My father was in the camp where it happened," "My grandfather knew the man," etc. One man said the story was told him by Archie Stackhouse himself. One woman gave me the following attest for her great-grandfather: "[Grandmother] says she is quite sure this story is true as her father was a very truthful man and he told it to her. This happened in the same vicinity as the incident of 'Gerrie's Rock.' Her father was on that drive too." If anyone doubt that, let him be anathema.

There are several literary versions of the story, as might be expected. Stanley Foss Bartlett mentions it in *Beyond the Sowdyhunk*, a collection of stories about the Great Northern Paper Company lumbercamps.⁴ Some time before that he had published the same version in the Lewiston (Maine) *Journal* magazine section. Gerald Averill tells the story in Chapter Seven of his good book, *Ridge Runner*.⁵ This chapter was published separately in *Field and Stream* under the title "Esau and the Gorbey," in the March, 1948 issue. Both of these twice-published tales had wide circulation in Maine and probably have complicated the pattern of oral circulation somewhat. Generally, however, it is easy enough to spot a version taken from one of these sources through certain persistent details. And while perhaps we cannot consider the following usage as literary in the strictest sense, the Reverend Alfred G. Hempstead has often used the story both as an anecdote in a talk on "Woods Superstitions" that he has given to service clubs throughout central Maine and as the theme for a sermon. Mr. Hempstead, by the way, brought a special authority to his telling, because during most of the twenties he had been in charge of the Social Services Division of the Great Northern Paper Company and knew the lumberwoods and the men who worked there well. More wonderful yet, on 6 November 1924, he officiated at the funeral of Archie Stackhouse himself up in Greenville.

The story of the man who plucked the gorbey has many parallels. There is a West Virginia version telling of a man who plucked a sparrow and was haunted by the sparrow's ghost until he went mad and died.⁶ A Nova Scotia version tells of a fisherman who caught a gull, cut its feet off, and said, "God damn you, get out and get your living the same way I have to." When he died, his hands were shrivelled up to look like bird claws.⁷ A man from Nelson, New Brunswick, tells our story, only the punishment is that his children are hairless. The same informant also tells of three boys who saw a bird's nest with three young in it. They cut out their tongues, and as a consequence their own offspring were tongue-tied.

There are no exact parallels mentioned in the *Motif-Index*, and I have discovered only two Old World analogues, both of which were sent me in response to my letters to the papers. One man remembers his father in Canterbury, England, telling the story about a common sparrow, and another from British Columbia recalls the story as it was told in his native Ayrshire, Scotland, around 1918 or 1920, about a Quentin Young, who plucked a robin and woke next morning to find all his hair "lying on his pillow."

How far back does the story go? In 1902 the late Fannie Hardy Eckstorm published an article called "Concerning the Bad Repute of Whiskey John."⁸ She makes no mention of the story at all, and I think we can be sure she would have, had she known it. Furthermore, she evidently knew nothing of the superstition that these birds were the souls of dead woodsmen, nor does she say anything about woodsmen

never harming them. In fact, she curses Whiskey Jack roundly for being a thief and a pest. "How the native hunters always hated Whiskey Jack!" she says. "They never had a good word for him, and a bullet was their usual greeting."⁹ The only indication that there might have been a superstition connected with the bird came when she offered two dollars apiece for the eggs but was never brought a single one. "On considering the evident reluctance of woodsmen to hunt up the nests of this bird," she says, "I have suspected that there may be some superstition connected with [it]. . . ." But she goes on to say that the superstition may be "similar to that which Mr. L. M. Turner records of the Labrador subspecies. The Indians there believe that if a person sees the eggs in the nest, and especially if he counts them, some great misfortune will befall him."¹⁰ At any rate, there is nothing about our story, and it seems safe to say that it was not well-known along the Penobscot at the turn of the century. Of course, it may go back further in other areas.

The answer to the question of the age, origin, and distribution of the story may lie in a curious etymological puzzle: that of the name "gorbey." You will notice that Fannie Eckstorm did not use the term. Further, while most of the standard bird books list the other names I have given at the beginning of this paper, they all omit the name "gorbey."¹¹ But in 1949, Ralph S. Palmer spoke of it as "a New Brunswick name which is also used in a few Maine localities."¹² Yet it is the name I have found most frequently when collecting this story; in fact, I found it twice as often as all the others. Looking the term up in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary*, we find the word "gorb" not only listed as Scots and Irish for "glutton, a greedy person or animal," but also as Scots and North-Country for "*an unfledged bird*," and figuratively "*anything very young or bare*." Both senses of the term certainly apply: the bird is greedy and he is unquestionably bare. Finally, when we know that the Scotch and North-Country English were very important in the settlement of New Brunswick (not to mention their settlements in the rest of the Maritimes and, to a lesser extent, Maine) and that thousands of New Brunswick woodsmen came to Maine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, our house of cards is complete and looks something like this: From Scotland or the North Country, the story came to New Brunswick, where it became associated with the Canada Jay (perhaps because this bird is easily caught). Through the story, the bird itself came to be called a "gorbey." New Brunswick woodsmen brought the term to Maine, where it flourished, partly because there was a well-known, utterly bald "character" named Archie Stackhouse in the heart of the busiest lumbering country in the Northeast. Admittedly it is only a hypothesis, but it is just too attractive not to mention.¹³

Finally, the story can be used to point up something which is becoming more clear to me all the time: the folklore of Maine and the Maritimes is one fabric. I will not deny that there are differences, but they are slight in comparison to the similarities, and here in this one story, we have an example of almost complete homogeneity in Maine and New Brunswick.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ Part of the material for this paper was gathered on field trips made possible by several generous grants from the Coe Research Fund of the University of Maine.

² Phillips Barry, ed., *The Maine Woods Songster* (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), p. 57.

³ The exception came from a man in Baie Comeau, Quebec, who said he had been an eyewitness to the event in a camp on Moccasin Lake near Whitney, Ontario.

- ⁴ (Portland, Maine, The Falmouth Book House, 1937), p. 147 f.
- ⁵ (Philadelphia and New York, 1948), pp. 115-129.
- ⁶ Ruth Ann Musick, "West Virginia Ghost Stories," *Midwest Folklore*, VIII (Spring 1958), 24-25.
- ⁷ Helen Creighton, *Bluenose Ghosts* (Toronto, 1957), p. 104.
- ⁸ *Bird-Lore*, IV (July-August 1902), 109-114. This was the official Audubon magazine.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ¹¹ Edward Howe Forbush, *The Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States* (Boston, 1929), II, 384; Ora W. Knight, *The Birds of Maine* (Bangor, 1908), p. 328; P. A. Taverner, *Birds of Canada* (Toronto, 1938), p. 304.
- ¹² "Maine Birds," *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard College*, CII, 377-378.
- ¹³ There is one other hypothesis for the origin of this word that should be mentioned, though I feel that the derivation I have just given is the correct one. W. L. McAtee, in his monograph "Folk Names of New England Birds" (reprinted from *The Bulletin of the Massachusetts Audubon Society*, October 1955 to May 1956) suggests, although he does not insist upon it, that its derivation is "Apparently from 'corbie'—tracing to the Latin *corvus*— a name applied in Great Britain to several members of the crow family." I have found "corbie" reported for both crow and raven but for nothing else. And while the jay is a member of the crow family, there is very little obvious resemblance. That is, the two birds are of such different habits and appearance that they are not likely to be confused, especially by woodsmen. On the other hand, notice A. Richard's word "corberie" used above.
- ¹⁴ For further support for this idea, see Horace P. Beck, "Folksong Affiliations of Maine," *Midwest Folklore*, VI (Fall 1956), 159-166. For another specific example of this homogeneity, see my article, "'Ben Deane' and Joe Scott: a Ballad and its Probable Author," *JAF*, LXXII (1959), 53-66.

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