

Oh-Le-Sho-Mi

by
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Many years ago, when the Wah-shase lived near Neshutze Grande Wah-gany, or Mississippi River, there dwelt in one of their villages a warrior called O-le-sho-mi. He was a man of wonderful strength and bravery, such as the nation does not now contain, for many years of quiet and peace have quenched the prowess of our young men. Now-a-days the young men care for nothing but finery, feasting, dancing and gallantries. It was not so in the good old days of which I am telling. Then the women would have beaten to death with switches such lazy, good-for-nothing warriors as we have now!

O-le-sho-mi had but one wife, and she was called Me-hos-ko-ron-kah, the Swan. How sad to think that there are no such women now! Me-hos-ko-ron-kah was stronger, purer and more beautiful than any woman which our tribe has seen for generations. She loved her husband and was true to him even in the face of brutal abuse and death.

There was much suffering and scarcity among the Wah-sashe at the time of which I am telling. There had been no rain for months; the corn and grass had dried up; the buffalo moved far to the westward and the people were hungry. Finally O-le-sho-mi said to his wife, "I have often heard of a river far to the west called Wah-set-to-ho-a, or Verdigris, where there is abundance of timber, water and game. Let us go there for a while, and see if we cannot find food for our children."

So they loaded their ponies and started toward the west. It was a long journey, my children, and they suffered greatly. But at last they set up a hasty lodge on the banks of the Verdigris, and O-le-sho-mi started out in the early dawn to hunt for deer.

Now our hunters kill deer with the rifle, with but little skill or labor. But O-le-sho-mi had only the bow. Think how cautious and wise he must have been to creep within bow-shot of such a swift and timid animal as the deer! Nevertheless, at nightfall he returned to his camp loaded down with venison.

But a sad spectacle awaited him. He found his lodge torn down. Before the door lay the dead body of his eldest boy, Ah-hu-ska or White Wing, his little hands still grasping the fragments of a lance. The brave child had died trying to defend his mother and home. Little Ah-sin-cah, the baby girl, lay close by, her brains having been dashed out against a tree. The other boy, the aged father and mother, all lay dead. The scalp had been torn from every bleeding head. The father had been staked to the ground and burned alive. His charred body was horrible to behold.

The wife's body was alone missing. In wild and terrible agony, O-le-sho-mi searched vainly. He knew the meaning of this absence; Me-hos-ko-ron-kah had been carried away a captive! From among the fragments of his lodge he picked up a curiously ornamented plume which told him that his family had been murdered by the Wichitas!

For seven days O-le-sho-mi fasted and mourned, in dull and stolid despair. Then a new inspiration fired him. Why not strive to follow the invaders and rescue his wife? Full of this resolution and hope, he arose and started down the hostile trail like a bloodhound on the scent.

He travelled south-westwardly over level plains for many miles. Then the trail entered high, rugged, wooded hills; and at last it led him on to the bank of the broad, shallow, muddy Arkansas.

It was mid-winter, and terribly cold. O-le-sho-mi was famished and desperate; he was resolved to rescue his wife or die. He climbed a lofty limestone cliff, and eagerly scanned the opposite shore. There, at the mouth of Tah-tunka Caha, or Deer Creek, rose from the dense underbrush the peaked roofs of a hundred Wichita lodges. He had tracked the panther to his lair! Tall, fierce, long-haired warriors were lounging about the camp; women were pursuing their tasks; but no trace was to be discovered of the lost wife. For ten days he lurked about the camp, starving and suffering. At last he concluded to return to his own people, and strive to arouse them to action in his behalf. He returned to the eastward with a heavy heart, and at last reached his old home in safety. He was ragged, footsore, wasted to a skeleton; but still the fires of hate and vengeance shone in his wild eyes.

But now overtaken nature gave way, and for weeks he lay near to death. It was spring when he once more arose from his bed. He eagerly strove to organize a war-party for the recovery of his wife, but in vain. The enemy was too strong, too fierce, too distant. And at last, driven to desperation, he started once more toward the foe, resolved to win his wife or die in the enemy's camp.

Me-hos-ko-ron-kah had been made a captive by the head chief of the Wichitas. He carried her to his lodge, and, for a time, treated her kindly. Fired by her beauty and grace, he sought to add her to his list of wives. But she was too full of sorrow and love for her husband and children to heed his offers. She mourned without ceasing for the lost ones. Their scalps dangled from the centre-pole of the lodge. She knew that the cruel chief had lighted the fire upon the body of her father. She believed that her husband was still alive, and that he would one day come to aid her. She steadfastly refused all the presents and advances of her captor, and disfigured her face with the black paint of the mourner. Finally, his wrath was kindled at her stubbornness, and his conduct changed. He offered her no more presents, but forced her, as a captive and a slave, to perform the most degrading and laborious tasks. His other wives naturally hated

the stranger because of their husband's passion, and took delight in heaping abuse on her. Starved and bruised, scorned and spit upon, Me-hos-ko-ron-kah performed her allotted labors, weeping and mourning continually, and praying for death.

When this treatment had for some time continued, Me-hos-ko-ron-kah one day received a visit from the chief while gathering fuel for the lodge. He said, "My sister, I have long wished to make you my wife. I treated you kindly and gave you presents, but you refused them. Then I punished you, but now my anger is over. I still offer you the highest place in my lodge. If you refuse me now, you shall wish that the dogs had devoured your mother before you were born."

Me-hos-ko-ron-kah only answered, "I cannot talk to you; the blood is not yet dry upon the scalps of my children; my husband is alive; go away from me and let me die."

But the chief responded, "You and your husband are Wah-sashe. They are all fools and cowards. Your husband can do nothing for you. He is still hiding in a hollow log for fear of the Wichitas. Your children were the children of a crawfish, not a man. We are the Wichitas, the rulers of the Plains. Become my wife, and you shall be the mother of chiefs and warriors."

But Me-hos-ko-ron-kah only turned away her head and wept. Then the chief said, "I am the great chief of the Wichitas. I can bring down rain and lightning. If I look you in the face, you will die. I will speedily take your husband's scalp and the scalp of a wood-rat and you shall not distinguish one from the other. And when I have starved and beaten you enough, I will hang your scalp with the rest." And he walked away in a rage.

Three days afterward he started to lead a war-party against the Pawnees. His wives redoubled their abuse of the poor captive. In about a month the Wichitas returned successful, laden with plunder and scalps. They burned a captive in the center of their village, and held a grand feast and celebration which lasted for many days.

And now the June rise of the Arkansas had come. The river was at its flood and almost impassable. One day Me-hos-ko-ron-kah went out to cut wood from a great tree near the camp. As she stood beneath the dense foliage a twig, bent into a circle, dropped at her feet. She looked up and there was O-le-sho-mi! His face was worn with fasting and hardship; his garments were dripping; but his eyes were bright with joy.

He said, "O, my wife, I have watched and labored so to recover you! I have come to take you home or die."

She whispered, "I knew you would come. I have mourned and waited. I am a prisoner in the chief's lodge, and am closely watched. I have now a little more freedom than formerly, because the river is at its height and

unfordable. The Wichitas are now holding their dances. They will commence beating the drum at nightfall, and will dance till long after midnight. Then they will strike the drums four taps and disperse to their lodges and go to sleep. Then meet me at yonder elm-tree, and we will escape or die together."

O-le-sho-mi said, "I have fasted and prayed to Wah-on-tah with weeping, and I know he has heard my prayer. He has placed this camp in my power, and I shall have the victory. Tell me which are the swiftest horses in the camp, and I will meet you as you have told me."

Me-hos-ko-ron-kah told him, lifted up her burden and returned to her prison. But at night, when the revel was over and the Wichitas had sunk to sleep, she glided softly out of the lodge and found O-le-sho-mi waiting with the swift horses. She mounted the swiftest and took the bridle of the other one. Then O-le-sho-mi glided softly toward the lodge of the chief, purposely making some slight noise to attract the attention of those within. He thirsted for a scalp. The chief himself came forth to ascertain the meaning of the sound. With the step of a panther, O-le-sho-mi stole from his hiding-place and struck one terrible blow with a hatchet, which cleft the brain of the enemy. Then he mounted, and the re-united pair forced their horses to swim the turbulent river, and rode eastward for liberty and life. Though hotly pursued next day by the enraged and astonished Wichitas, they reached their home by the Mississippi in safety. Me-hos-ko-ron-kah was blessed with one son after this event, who was the father of a line of wise men and counsellors. Of this stock sprung the elder and younger Cheto-pa, who still bears the patronymic of "Whirling Eagle."