



# *How the Otter Skin Became Great "Medicine"*

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Native Americannorth American

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*Easy*  
*13 min read*

It was rather late when we left War Eagle's lodge after having learned why the Indians never kill the Mice-people; and the milky way was white and plain, dimming the stars with its mist. The children all stopped to say good night to little Sees-in-the-dark, a brand-new baby sister of Bluebird's; then they all went to bed.

The next day the boys played at war, just as white boys do; and the girls played with dolls dressed in buckskin clothes, until it grew tiresome, when they visited relatives until it came time for us all to go to their grandfather's lodge. He was smoking when we entered, but soon laid aside the pipe and said:

"You know that the otter skin is big medicine, no doubt. You have noticed that our warriors wear it sometimes and you know that we all think it very lucky to wear the skin of the Otter. But you don't know how it came to be great; so I shall tell you.

"One time, long before my grandfather was born, a young-man of our tribe was unlucky in everything. No woman wanted to marry him, because he couldn't kill enough meat to keep her in food and clothes. Whenever he went hunting, his bow always broke or he would lose his lance. If these things didn't happen, his horse

would fall and hurt him. Everybody talked about him and his bad luck, and although he was fine-looking, he had no close friends, because of his ill fortune. He tried to dream and get his medicine but no dream would come. He grew sour and people were sorry for him all the time. Finally his name was changed to 'The Unlucky-one,' which sounds bad to the ear. He used to wander about alone a good deal, and one morning he saw an old woman gathering wood by the side of a River. The Unlucky-one was about to pass the old woman when she stopped him and asked:

“Why are you so sad in your handsome face? Why is that sorry look in your fine eyes?”

“Because,’ replied the young-man, ‘I am the Unlucky-one. Everything goes wrong with me, always. I don’t want to live any longer, for my heart is growing wicked.’

“Come with me,’ said the old woman, and he followed her until she told him to sit down. Then she said: ‘Listen to me. First you must learn a song to sing, and this is it.’ Then she sang a queer song over and over again until the young-man had learned it well.

“Now do what I tell you, and your heart shall be glad some day.’ She drew from her robe a pair of moccasins and a small sack of dried meat. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘put these moccasins on your feet and take this sack of meat for food, for you must travel far. Go on down this river until you come to a great beaver village. Their lodges will be large and fine-looking and you will know the village by the great size of the lodges. When you get to the place, you must stand still for a long time, and then sing the song I taught you. When you have finished the singing, a great white Beaver, chief of all the Beavers in the world, will come to you. He is wise and can tell you what to do to change your luck. After that I cannot help you; but do what the white Beaver tells you, without asking why. Now go, and be brave!’

“The young-man started at once. Long his steps were, for he was young and strong. Far he travelled down the river—saw many beaver villages, too, but he did not stop, because the lodges were not big, as the old woman told him they would be in the right village. His feet grew tired for he travelled day and night without resting, but his heart was brave and he believed what the old woman had told him.

“It was late on the third day when he came to a mighty beaver village and here the lodges were greater than any he had ever seen before. In the centre of the camp was a monstrous lodge built of great sticks and towering

above the rest. All about, the ground was neat and clean and bare as your hand. The Unlucky-one knew this was the white Beaver's lodge—knew that at last he had found the chief of all the Beavers in the world; so he stood still for a long time, and then sang that song.

“Soon a great white Beaver—white as the snows of winter—came to him and asked: ‘Why do you sing that song, my brother? What do you want of me? I have never heard a man sing that song before. You must be in trouble.’

“‘I am the Unlucky-one,’ the young-man replied. ‘I can do nothing well. I can find no woman who will marry me. In the hunt my bow will often break or my lance is poor. My medicine is bad and I cannot dream. The people do not love me, and they pity me as they do a sick child.’

“‘I am sorry for you,’ said the white Beaver—chief of all the Beavers in the world—‘but you must find my brother the Coyote, who knows where OLD-man's lodge is. The Coyote will do your bidding if you sing that song when you see him. Take this stick with you, because you will have a long journey, and with the stick you may cross any river and not drown, if you keep it always in your hand. That is all I can do for you, myself.’

“On down the river the Unlucky-one travelled and the sun was low in the west on the fourth day, when he saw the Coyote on a hillside near by. After looking at Coyote for a long time, the young-man commenced to sing the song the old woman had taught him. When he had finished the singing, the Coyote came up close and asked:

“‘What is the matter? Why do you sing that song? I never heard a man sing it before. What is it you want of me?’

“Then the Unlucky-one told the Coyote what he had told the white Beaver, and showed the stick the Beaver-chief had given him, to prove it.

“‘I am hungry, too,’ said the Unlucky-one, ‘for I have eaten all the dried meat the old woman gave me.’

“‘Wait here,’ said the Coyote, ‘my brother the Wolf has just killed a fat Doe, and perhaps he will give me a little of the meat when I tell him about you and your troubles.’

“Away went the Coyote to beg for meat, and while he was gone the young-man bathed his tired feet in a cool creek. Soon the Coyote came back with meat, and young-man built a fire and ate some of it, even before it was warm, for he was starving. When he had finished the Coyote said:

“Now I shall take you to OLD-man’s lodge, come.’

“They started, even though it was getting dark. Long they travelled without stopping—over plains and mountains—through great forests and across rivers, until they came to a cave in the rough rocks on the side of a mighty mountain.

“In there,’ said the Coyote, ‘you will find OLD-man and he can tell you what you want to know.’

“The Unlucky-one stood before the black hole in the rocks for a long time, because he was afraid; but when he turned to speak to the Coyote he found himself to be alone. The Coyote had gone about his own business—had silently slipped away in the night.

“Slowly and carefully the young-man began to creep into the cave, feeling his way in the darkness. His heart was beating like a tom-tom at a dance. Finally he saw a fire away back in the cave.

“The shadows danced about the stone sides of the cave as men say the ghosts do; and they frightened him. But looking, he saw a man sitting on the far side of the fire. The man’s hair was like the snow and very long. His face was wrinkled with the seams left by many years of life and he was naked in the firelight that played about him.

“Slowly the young-man stood upon his feet and began to walk toward the fire with great fear in his heart. When he had reached the place where the firelight fell upon him, the OLD-man looked up and said:

“How, young-man, I am OLD-man. Why did you come here? What is it you want?”

“Then the Unlucky-one told OLD-man just what he had told the old woman and the white Beaver and the Coyote, and showed the stick the Beaver had given him, to prove it.

“Smoke,’ said OLD-man, and passed the pipe to his visitor. After they had smoked OLD-man said:

“I will tell you what to do. On the top of this great mountain there live many ghost-people and their chief is a great Owl. This Owl is the only one who knows how you can change your luck, and he will tell you if you are not afraid. Take this arrow and go among those people, without fear. Show them you are unarmed as soon as they see you. Now go!”

“Out into the night went the Unlucky-one and on up the mountain. The way was rough and the wind blew from the north, chilling his limbs and stinging his face, but on he went toward the mountain-top, where the storm-clouds sleep and the winter always stays. Drifts of snow were piled all about, and the wind gathered it up and hurled it at the young man as though it were angry at him. The clouds waked and gathered around him, making the night darker and the world lonelier than before, but on the very top of the mountain he stopped and tried to look through the clouds. Then he heard strange singing all about him; but for a long time there was no singer in sight. Finally the clouds parted and he saw a great circle of ghost-people with large and ugly heads. They were seated on the icy ground and on the drifts of snow and on the rocks, singing a warlike song that made the heart of the young-man stand still, in dread. In the centre of the circle there sat a mighty Owl—their chief. Ho!—when the ghost-people saw the Unlucky-one they rushed at him with many lances and would have killed him but the Owl-chief cried, ‘Stop!’

“The young-man folded his arms and said: ‘I am unarmed—come and see how a Blackfoot dies. I am not afraid of you.’

“‘Ho!’ said the Owl-chief, ‘we kill no unarmed man. Sit down, my son, and tell me what you want. Why do you come here? You must be in trouble. You must smoke with me.’

“The Unlucky-one told the Owl-chief just what he had told the old woman and the Beaver and the Coyote and OLD-man, and showed the stick that the white Beaver had given him and the arrow that OLD-man had given to him to prove it.

“‘Good,’ said the Owl-chief, ‘I can help you, but first you must help yourself. Take this bow. It is a medicine-bow; then you will have a bow that will not break and an arrow that is good and straight. Now go down this mountain until you come to a river. It will be dark when you reach this river, but you will know the way. There will be a great cottonwood-tree on the bank of the stream where you first come to the water. At this tree, you

must turn down the stream and keep on travelling without rest, until you hear a splashing in the water near you. When you hear the splashing, you must shoot this arrow at the sound. Shoot quickly, for if you do not you can never have any good luck. If you do as I have told you the splasher will be killed and you must then take his hide and wear it always. The skin that the splasher wears will make you a lucky man. It will make anybody lucky and you may tell your people that it is so.

“Now go, for it is nearly day and we must sleep.’

“The young-man took his bow and arrow and the stick the white Beaver had given him and started on his journey. All the day he travelled, and far into the night. At last he came to a river and on the bank he saw the great cottonwood-tree, just as the ghost Owl had told him. At the tree the young-man turned down the stream and in the dark easily found his way along the bank. Very soon he heard a great splashing in the water near him, and—zipp—he let the arrow go at the sound—then all was still again. He stood and looked and listened, but for a long time could see nothing—hear nothing.

“Then the moon came out from under a cloud and just where her light struck the river, he saw some animal floating—dead. With the magic stick the young-man walked out on the water, seized the animal by the legs and drew it ashore. It was an Otter, and the young-man took his hide, right there.

“A Wolf waited in the brush for the body of the Otter, and the young-man gave it to him willingly, because he remembered the meat the Wolf had given the Coyote. As soon as the young-man had skinned the Otter he threw the hide over his shoulder and started for his own country with a light heart, but at the first good place he made a camp, and slept. That night he dreamed and all was well with him.

“After days of travel he found his tribe again, and told what had happened. He became a great hunter and a great chief among us. He married the most beautiful woman in the tribe and was good to her always. They had many children, and we remember his name as one that was great in war. That is all—Ho!”

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