



Old-Man and His Conscience

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Native Americannorth American

Intermediate
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Not so many miles away from the village, the great mountain range so divides the streams that are born there, that their waters are offered as tribute to the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans. In this wonderful range the Indians believe the winds are made, and that they battle for supremacy over Gunsight Pass. I have heard an old story, too, that is said to have been generally believed by the Blackfeet, in which a monster bull-elk that lives in Gunsight Pass lords it over the winds. This elk creates the North wind by “flapping” one of his ears, and the South wind by the same use of his other. I am inclined to believe that the winds are made in that Pass, myself, for there they are seldom at rest, especially at this season of the year.

To-night the wind was blowing from the north, and filmy white clouds were driven across the face of the nearly full moon, momentarily veiling her light. Lodge poles creaked and strained at every heavy gust, and sparks from the fires inside the lodges sped down the wind, to fade and die.

In his lodge War Eagle waited for us, and when we entered he greeted us warmly, but failed to mention the gale. “I have been waiting,” he said. “You are late and the story I shall tell you is longer than many of the others.” Without further delay the story-telling commenced.

“Once OLD-man came upon a lodge in the forest. It was a fine one, and painted with strange signs. Smoke was curling from the top, and thus he knew that the person who lived there was at home. Without calling or

speaking, he entered the lodge and saw a man sitting by the fire smoking his pipe. The man didn't speak, nor did he offer his pipe to OLD-man, as our people do when they are glad to see visitors. He didn't even look at his guest, but OLD-man has no good manners at all. He couldn't see that he wasn't wanted, as he looked about the man's lodge and made himself at home. The linings were beautiful and were painted with fine skill. The lodge was clean and the fire was bright, but there was no woman about.

"Leaning against a fine back-rest, OLD-man filled his own pipe and lighted it with a coal from the man's fire. Then he began to smoke and look around, wondering why the man acted so queerly. He saw a star that shone down through the smoke-hole, and the tops of several trees that were near the lodge. Then he saw a woman—way up in a tree top and right over the lodge. She looked young and beautiful and tall.

"Whose woman is that up there in the tree top?" asked OLD-man.

"She's your woman if you can catch her and will marry her,' growled the man; 'but you will have to live here and help me make a living.'

"I'll try to catch her, and if I do I will marry her and stay here, for I am a great hunter and can easily kill what meat we want,' said Old-man.

"He went out of the lodge and climbed the tree after the woman. She screamed, but he caught her and held her, although she scratched him badly. He carried her into the lodge and there renewed his promise to stay there always. The man married them, and they were happy for four days, but on the fifth morning OLD-man was gone—gone with all the dried meat in the lodge—the thief.

"When they were sure that the rascal had run away the woman began to cry, but not so the man. He got his bow and arrows and left the lodge in anger. There was snow on the ground and the man took the track of OLD-man, intending to catch and kill him.

"The track was fresh and the man started on a run, for he was a good hunter and as fast as a Deer. Of course he gained on OLD-man, who was a much slower traveller; and the Sun was not very high when the old thief stopped on a hilltop to look back. He saw the man coming fast.

"This will never do,' he said to himself. "That queer person will catch me. I know what I shall do; I shall turn

myself into a dead Bull-Elk and lie down. Then he will pass me and I can go where I please.'

"He took off his moccasins and said to them: 'Moccasins, go on toward the west. Keep going and making plain tracks in the snow toward the big-water where the Sun sleeps. The queer-one will follow you, and when you pass out of the snowy country, you can lose him. Go quickly for he is close upon us.'

"The moccasins ran away as OLD-man wanted them to, and they made plain tracks in the snow leading away toward the big-water. OLD-man turned into a dead Bull-Elk and stretched himself near the tracks the moccasins had made.

"Up the hill came the man, his breath short from running. He saw the dead Elk, and thought it might be OLD-man playing a trick. He was about to shoot an arrow into the dead Elk to make sure; but just as he was about to let the arrow go, he saw the tracks the moccasins had made. Of course he thought the moccasins were on OLD-man's feet, and that the carcass was really that of a dead Elk. He was badly fooled and took the tracks again. On and on he went, following the moccasins over hills and rivers. Faster than before went the man, and still faster travelled the empty moccasins, the trail growing dimmer and dimmer as the daylight faded. All day long, and all of the night the man followed the tracks without rest or food, and just at daybreak he came to the shore of the big-water. There, right by the water's edge, stood the empty moccasins, side by side.

"The man turned and looked back. His eyes were red and his legs were trembling. 'Caw—caw, caw,' he heard a Crow say. Right over his head he saw the black bird and knew him, too.

"Ho! OLD-man, you were in that dead Bull-Elk. You fooled me, and now you are a Crow. You think you will escape me, do you? Well, you will not; for I, too, know magic, and am wise.'

"With a stick the man drew a circle in the sand. Then he stood within the ring and sang a song. OLD-man was worried and watched the strange doings from the air overhead. Inside the circle the man began to whirl about so rapidly that he faded from sight, and from the centre of the circle there came an Eagle. Straight at the Crow flew the Eagle, and away toward the mountains sped the Crow, in fright.

"The Crow knew that the Eagle would catch him, so that as soon as he reached the trees on the mountains he turned himself into a Wren and sought the small bushes under the tall trees. The Eagle saw the change, and at once began turning over and over in the air. When he had reached the ground, instead of an Eagle a Sparrow-

hawk chased the Wren. Now the chase was fast indeed, for no place could the Wren find in which to hide from the Sparrow-hawk. Through the brush, into trees, among the weeds and grass, flew the Wren with the Hawk close behind. Once the Sparrow-hawk picked a feather from the Wren's tail—so close was he to his victim. It was nearly over with the Wren, when he suddenly came to a park along a river's side. In this park were a hundred lodges of our people, and before a fine lodge there sat the daughter of the chief. It was growing dark and chilly, but still she sat there looking at the river. The Sparrow-hawk was striking at the Wren with his beak and talons, when the Wren saw the young-woman and flew straight to her. So swift he flew that the young-woman didn't see him at all, but she felt something strike her hand, and when she looked she saw a bone ring on her finger. This frightened her, and she ran inside the lodge, where the fire kept the shadows from coming. OLD-man had changed into the ring, of course, and the Sparrow-hawk didn't dare to go into the lodge; so he stopped outside and listened. This is what he heard OLD-man say:

“Don't be frightened, young-woman, I am neither a Wren nor a ring. I am OLD-man and that Sparrow-hawk has chased me all the day and for nothing. I have never done him harm, and he bothers me without reason.’

“Liar—forked-tongue,’ cried the Sparrow-hawk. ‘Believe him not, young-woman. He has done wrong. He is wicked and I am not a Sparrow-hawk, but conscience. Like an arrow I travel, straight and fast. When he lies or steals from his friends I follow him. I talk all the time and he hears me, but lies to himself, and says he does not hear. You know who I am, young-woman, I am what talks inside a person.’

“OLD-man heard what the Sparrow-hawk said, and he was ashamed for once in his life. He crawled out of the lodge. Into the shadows he ran away—away into the night, and the darkness—away from himself!

“You see,” said War Eagle, as he reached for his pipe, “OLD-man knew that he had done wrong, and his heart troubled him, just as yours will bother you if you do not listen to the voice that speaks within yourselves.

Whenever that voice says a thing is wicked, it is wicked—no matter who says it is not. Yes—it is very hard for a man to hide from himself. Ho!”

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