

Original.

INDIAN TRAITS.

THE STORY OF NISKAGAH.

BY MRS SEBA SMITH.

WHEN a Pawnee Loup Brave has become weary of inaction, and desires to lead in some daring adventure, he may, according to the customs of his tribe, retire from the village, and erect, from the branches of trees, a temporary lodge, suspend, in some prominent place, the belt of wampum, and then seat himself quietly to smoke his pipe, certain that the adventurous and chivalric spirits about him will soon collect, and be ready to participate in any peril. If the leader be brave and popular, his volunteers are assembled with far greater celerity than a Highland gathering, or the flocking of feudal retainers around the Barons of the olden time. In this way, too, the greatest secrecy prevails, as no one can know the object of the Brave, till it is his will to reveal it. The term, Brave, is an epithet of distinction conferred only upon those who have become renowned for their military prowess.

In the summer of 18—, the son of old Thife, Chief of the Pawnee Loups, residing upon a branch of the Platte River, was observed in this way to retire from his people. The young chief, though scarcely upon the verge of manhood, was already distinguished in all the skill, daring and hardihood of an accomplished savage warrior, and had earned the envied appellation of the *bravest of the Braves*.

It was in vain that the beautiful wife of the Chief timidly approached the lodge, and tossing her infant before him, sought to engage his attention. He motioned her away, and resumed his pipe, neither by look nor gesture betokening that he marked the drooping sadness of her eye, and the lingering of her footsteps, as she turned to depart.

It may well be supposed that he remained not long in solitude. The best and bravest of the tribe sought his retirement—one by one they entered the lodge, took down the belt of wampum from the buffalo horns upon which it was suspended, drew it slowly through the left hand, restored it to its position, and then seated themselves beside him.

When the requisite number had assembled, the ceremonies preceding an adventure of the kind, commenced. Fasting and prayers, with mystical and varied incantations, were observed for many days. No one returned to his cabin to exchange greetings with wife or kindred; every thing yielded to the solemn preparations of the warrior. They threw themselves, at night, upon mats of skin, and awaited the visitations of sleep, for then the Great Spirit would descend, and in dreams, make known his will to his children.

Morning came—the Pawnee Brave sprang from his couch with a *flashing eye*, his natural bearing of fierce defiance made still more terrible by the streaks of black paint upon his visage, which had been put on for the ceremonial. Grimly the chiefs eyed one another; for their dreams had been wild and disconnected, and the

voice of the Great Spirit had failed to reach the ears of his children. The Chief advanced, his eyes gleaming red from beneath his helmet, and stretching forth his arm, upon which rattled the quills of his feathered robe, he thus addressed them:—

“Warriors, all night I could hear the whispering of the Great Spirit, but the words were borne away by a strong wind. I tried to listen, but I could not. There is a serpent in our midst. Let him depart.”

His hand dropped by his side, and he stood with foot advanced, head inclined, and looking fiercely upon the group before him. Slowly a young warrior arose, and left the lodge.

A smile of derision passed over the face of the youthful Brave, and a low guttural expression of scorn escaped the lips of the grim chieftains. The recent Brave had but lately married his bride, and in the silence of midnight he had stolen to her side. Thus had all their incantations been counteracted, and the expedition delayed.

All day were the warriors engaged in their mysterious rites, practiced with renewed and awful solemnity. The *dim shadows of the old woods* rested upon the lonely lodge, the pale stars looked down, and the night-breeze trembled into silence, while the Great Spirit passed over them, revealing his will.

When the morning came, the leader stood ready to disclose his intentions. He spoke of a tribe, distant a journey of many days, by whom their warriors had once been defeated, and the insult remained unavenged.

“Warriors, upon the land of our foe were many saplings; they were small—our children might have rooted them up. They are now mighty trees, casting their shadow upon the earth. They grew with the blood of our warriors. Chiefs, the old men of our foe, tell over their scalps, and they say, this, and this, and this, is the scalp of a Pawnee Loup. Let us avenge them. The hatchet has slept till it is covered with rust. We will dig it up, and make it bright till the blood of our people is revenged.”

Grimly the chiefs arose, each adorned according to his rank as a Brave, or his skill as a huntsman. The plumes of the war-eagle nodding upon their crest, and the hairs of the white buffalo, and the scalps of the slain depending from their arms and legs. The bow and quiver hung at their back, one arm supported the shield of tough buffalo hide, and the right had grasped the massy spear.

The Pawnee leader eyed, for a moment, the gallant band, and then with measured pace commenced their perilous march, the towering crest rising and falling to the long, undulating step, resembling the trot of one of their own forest deer.

With unerring sagacity they threaded the pathless woods—forded the rapid torrent, and traversed the wide and monotonous prairie. As they approached the doomed village, their vigilance was redoubled. Not a twig snapped beneath their moccasins—not a shrub was suffered to remain crushed by the footstep. They laid in ambush till the last torch expired in the wigwam, and the last wail of the restless child was hushed on the

breast of its mother. Then arose the wild and appalling sound of the war-whoop. The battle-axe and the arrow found their victim, and the yell of the warrior, grappling with his foe, the stifled cry of childhood, and the shrill shriek of woman, mingled with the tumult of battle, and the crackling of flames. Fierce and desperate was the strife, and fearful the destruction. Scarcely a warrior was left to the tribe, to tell the tale of death. The Pawnees weary with labor, and laden with trophies, mounted the horses of their foes, and prepared to depart.

Beside the Pawnee leader rode a beautiful captive he had spared in the battle. Her father, rushing from his dwelling, had encountered the Pawnee Loup upon the threshold, and a long and desperate battle ensued. The Chief fell, and the victor found within, a matron sheltering a child in her bosom, and her daughter by her side. The maiden approached the Brave with a faint smile, saying, "Would you kill a Squaw?" The uplifted weapon fell to his side, and the cabin was spared.

The captive was scarcely fifteen, yet had she sprung to the maturity and rounded outline of early womanhood. A world of passion seemed slumbering beneath the dreamy lids, and there was a liteness of motion, and gleamings of vivacity through the voluptuous indolence of the untutored girl, that might have won the admiration of more cultivated observers. Her dress was a snowy robe, made of the skin of the mountain goat, ornamented with quills of the porcupine, gorgeously colored. Leggings and moccasins of the same material, and similarly adorned, the springing curve of the latter giving promise of a small, elegantly formed foot. Her long, abundant hair, parted from the forehead, fell in braids far below the girdle. She managed the small restive animal which she rode, with a skill and dexterity not unmarked by her captor, who might thence be pardoned the display of the like accomplishment in the presence of one so fair, and so well qualified to appreciate it.

Dauntlessly all day did she ride beside the Pawnee Loup, a captive, yet with a lofty bearing, an air of proud indifference, that neither sought nor repelled sympathy; threading her way through the dense forests, galloping over the prairies, and plunging her horse into the stream to ford the rivers that impeded their progress. At night, she slept upon her couch of skins, nor dreamed of danger. The accidents of death and captivity were too frequent in the history of Indian life, to elicit much emotion, and the separation from her kindred was little different from what it would probably have been, had this been her bridal excursion, as scarcely ever did a maiden of her tribe marry one of their own people. True, her captivity might close in torture, and a lingering death, but she was a child of the woods, with a native apathy as to all evils in the possible future, and when trial should come, was ready to meet it in any shape, with a spirit worthy of her race.

Once she placed her finger upon the grey-haired scalp of an old man, that hung at the girdle of the Brave, and said in a low voice, "It was my father's."

A flush passed over the brow of the Pawnee Loup, and he looked earnestly in the face of the poor girl.

"He died the death of a brave chief," he at length replied.

"Yes," responded the maiden, mournfully, "but he has no son to avenge his death; his memory will be like the leaf of autumn when it is dry. Would that Niskagah had been a son!"

They had now approached within view of the village. It stood upon an elevated plain, rich in pasturage, the river sweeping by in front, with its perpetual beauty, and untiring melody, and flanked by a heavy forest, undulating in the distance, draping the hills in verdure, and lovingly embracing the little lakes that sparkled in the sunshine, like diamonds scattered in the great wilderness. The party came to a halt, while a messenger was despatched to the village with notice of their arrival.

Instantly all was commotion, and a multitude approached to escort the victorious chiefs to the council lodge. The women brandished the weapons of war, elevated the trophies of victory, and led the way with cries of exultation. The wife of the leader conveyed the captive to her own cabin, presented her with parched corn and venison, and spread the mats for her repose.

Solemnly and in silence assembled the chiefs in council, to hear the result of the expedition, and determine the fate of the prisoner. The Pawnee leader gave the particulars of the enterprise, with a brevity becoming the character of a chief, already renowned, not only for his skill in battle, but wisdom at the council hall. Revenge, rather than plunder, had been the incitement to action, and they had returned, laden with the scalps of the foe, and a daughter of the chief of the tribe, to await the will of the council board. The warriors of their foemen had fallen in battle, and women and children alone remained to tell, in after years, of the deadly vengeance of the Pawnee Loup.

It was the great festival of the Buffalo Hunt, but a mortality had appeared amongst them, and the animals were sickly and scarce, and hardly rewarded the labor of the hunter. Their Medicine men had hinted at a solemn sacrifice necessary to appease the wrath of the malignant spirit.

An old man arose, trembling with age, his hair white with the frosts of a century. He bowed heavily upon his staff, and cast his dim eyes over the assembly.

"Brothers, I am an old man; the hunters that went with me to the chase, have departed. The warriors that followed me to battle, are not. The sapling that I bent when a child, is now a gnarled tree, grey with the moss of years—such am I. Many suns ago, the evil spirits destroyed our game as they do now. We had forgotten to do them honor. Then we offered a human sacrifice at our great festival, and they were appeased, and the buffalo and the deer came down to drink in our rivers, and fed upon the great prairies. The Great Spirit has reserved the captive maiden, that his children may do what is right."

Low sounds of applause spread over the assembly, and when the chiefs separated, it was to prepare, the next day, for the great sacrifice which should avert the evils that threatened the tribe.

Niskagah was in the cabin of her captor when told of

the fate that awaited her. An instant flush mounted to her cheek and temples, as if a pang had forced the blood, in a strong current, from the heart, and then it retreated, leaving in its place a fearful pallor. She raised her dark eyes imploringly to the face of the Pawnee Loup, but she met only the stolid look of an unsympathising heart. Ashamed of her weakness, she raised herself to her full height, threw back the masses of her jetty hair, and addressed him in a tone of defiance.

"Niskagah is the daughter of a great chief—she fears not to die. The Pawnee Loup is a brave chief—he took the scalp of an old man;" and she laughed in scorn.

For a moment lightning seemed to dart from the fierce eyes of the young chief; and then he folded his arms and moved not while she continued—

"The Pawnee Loups know not how to torture their enemies—they are faint-hearted. They should have spared our chiefs to teach them. Our young men had eaten the hearts of the Pawnee Loup warriors; it made them strong. Every chief had the scalp of a Pawnee Loup at his girdle. Would Niskagah might die by the hands of a brave people—but the Pawnee Loups are faint-hearted—they cannot torture her."

The night came on, burdened with wind and rain. The tall grass of the prairies undulated like the vexed waters of the ocean, and the river, swollen by the mountain torrents, roared over its rocky channel, foaming and tumultuous. Niskagah arose from her bed of skins, and looked forth into the darkness of the night. She thought not of escape, for she had witnessed the defence of the village, and knew the attempt were useless. She was alone amidst the solitude of the night, and the wild uproar of the elements, and now her woman's nature returned, and she pressed her hands upon her brow, and wept bitterly. All that instinctive clinging to life that belongs to humanity in every condition, pressed upon her, and made her recoil from the prospect of its speedy termination, with all the wildness of terror. The mode, too, protracted and horrible, glared up before the eyes of the lone girl, and her flesh already palpitated under the torture of the burning pitch, or quivered under the knife. The pride of her race, and the daring bitterness of her own proud spirit forsook her, now that she was alone with none to witness her weakness, and powerful—very powerful became her woman's nature, with its shrinking dependence, its dread of solitary suffering, and tremil-like reaching for support. It may be that a vague dream of rescue from her gallant captor haunted her imagination, but she remembered his cold, unsympathising look, and the long night wore on, and still he slept. Hope died within her, and gave place to a wildness of excitement, and she rushed forth into the tempest.

Passing a cabin door, she was arrested by low moans from within, and companionship, even in suffering, drew her towards it. Suddenly a young mother raised the skins that concealed the entrance, and stood in the tempest, her long hair streaming in the wind, and she gave utterance to her sorrow in words like these:—

"Alas! why didst thou leave me, my child? My bosom is full of nourishment; why didst thou go? Who will nurse thee, my infant—who comfort and shelter thee?"

I cannot stay in my cabin while the cold wind is blowing about thee, and the rain sinking into thy bed. Thy skins are wet, my child, and thy cheek is cold and damp. Come to my bosom! Let me feed thee, and dry the rain from thy hair. I cannot rest in my wigwam—I cannot be warm and sheltered, whilst thou art cold in thy little grave."

Then she sank down upon the threshold, and uttered low wailing. It was the first sorrow of the young savage, the grief of the untutored mother at the loss of her first born.

Niskagah envied the lot of the unconscious child, that had thus gone to the land of spirits, ere it had known the bitterness of life. Yet the grief of another had allayed the excitement of her own heart, and she returned to the cabin, with the renewed apathy of her people, and the gleamings of hope that can never quite desert the young heart. She slept long and soundly, and awoke only to the sound of the wild birds as they bithly hailed the purity of the morning. The heavy dew weighed down the herbage, and the clouds rolled away where the mountain tops seemed to beckon their coming. The river poured on with its swollen waters, chafing its rocky bed, and its hollow voice was heard where it plunged down a chasm of rocks, sending up a volume of spray, upon which the morning sun was showering rainbow gems, and crowning it as with a diadem.

The wife of the Pawnee Loup presented the captive venison and fruits, but she motioned her away, saying, "Niskagah will talk with the Great Spirit—she will soon be in the land of shadows," then turning her face to the wall, she folded her robe over her bosom, and awaited those who should lead her to the stake.

All things were in readiness. Women were there, eager with expectation, and children, awed by the presence of their seniors, looked breathlessly at the elevated stake and instruments of torture. Warriors were there adorned with paint, and the trophies of battle, and helmets nodding with plumes, but conspicuous in the midst was the son of the chief, with the eagle crest towering above the chiefs of the tribe. Wildly did the Medicine Man pursue the preliminary ceremonies, singing chants in a low, guttural tone, keeping time with measured step, and then tossing his arms in the air, raising his voice to a piercing scream, the bells of his robe jangling, and scalps fluttering in the wind. At length bounding from the ground, he returned, slowly leading in the victim, her wrists crossed meekly before her, and her unbound hair falling like a black veil nearly to her feet. Her step was feeble, and her lips compressed, as if to crowd back all memory of weakness.

As she approached the stake, she raised her eyes timidly from the ground, and encountered those of the young Pawnee Loup. Instantly the shrinking girl became the proud child of the woods, sending back the gaze of the eager multitude with a look of fearless defiance, and approaching the instruments of torture with a step almost of alacrity. A shout of exultation burst from the crowd at the noble bearing of the prisoner.

There was a rush—and the whole multitude sprang

to their feet. The Pawnee Loup had bounded into the arena, and borne the captive from their midst—and off over the broad prairies, and up by the roar of the cataract was seen the tall form of the warrior, and the robe of the fearless maiden, as their fleet horses panted for the desert. Not a bow was strung, nor javelin poised. It was an impulse from the Great Spirit, which it were impious to counteract. Rapidly and in silence the fugitives pursued their flight. The Pawnee Loup scarcely glanced at his companion, as she gave the reins to her steed, and kept by his side, fearless and unhesitating, her eye dancing with renewed hope and happiness, and a smile playing upon her lip as they welled up from her young heart. At night, when the Chief spread her skins, in the shadow of the great forest, and watched her slumbers at a distance, Niskagah slept with the security of a child. When she awoke, she loved her face in the brook that bubbled at her feet, and braided her abundant hair, using it for a mirror. Seven days had they pursued their perilous way through the wilderness, greeted only by the howl of the wild beast, and the barking of Wish-ton-wish, when Niskagah knew they were approaching the country of her own people.

They were now on the outskirts of the forest, and the Chief pointed to the hills behind which arose the smoke of their cabins. Niskagah heard him in silence. When he turned to depart, she laid her hand timidly upon his arm, and with the pathos of nature, said—

"The home of Niskagah is desolate. Grass grows in the foot-path of our warriors, and the council-fire is extinguished. The hunter has ceased from the chase. The blood of our chiefs is still wet upon the threshold. I would not behold it."

"Niskagah is a proud maiden," replied the Brave. "She will be Chief of her tribe, and she will teach her young men to take vengeance on the Pawnee Loups. Niskagah must be the wife of a great chief, who has many wives, for she would scorn to cook his venison, and make his wampum belts and moccasins."

The girl sprang to his side, all the passion of her nature beaming from her dark flashing eyes. The Chief bent his looks admiringly upon the beautiful girl, and her lids fell under his ardent gaze. Her head drooped, and her voice was low and sweet.

"Niskagah is proud; she is the daughter of a great chief—but she is not too proud to love—and love would make her very gentle"—and her round lip quivered with the timidity of her sex.

It may be that the Pawnee Loup remembered his own fair bride, singing a lullaby to his child—for he turned, away, and Niskagah remained motionless till the forest hid him from her view, and then in weariness and solitude sought the ruins of her village.

When the Brave returned to his own council hall, none questioned his right to do as he had done. He was wise in council, and brave in battle, and his will had the authority of law. But his wife saw the growing gloom upon his brow, and that her own smiles could not dispel it. His wigwam was lonely, and the game he killed in the chase, went to the cabins of others, for he had few to eat it. She tried often to give utterance to the

thoughts of her heart, but they died upon her lips. But she had determined on the great sacrifice, for her love sought only the happiness of its object.

She had nursed her infant to sleep, and laid him on the skins beside its father, and then in a low voice she said—

"The Brave grows weary of his cabin—it is lonely. Niskagah is very beautiful, and she loves the Pawnee Loup."

She said no more, but pressed her lips to the cheek of her child, and when she raised her head, a tear had fallen upon it. The Chief took her to his bosom, and the wife wept long and bitterly. Yet she urged his departure, for she saw the beauty of the captive was still fresh in his memory.

With woman, love is ever the same, whether in the halls of elegance and refinement, or the simple cabin of the savage—it is still true to its nature—still self-sacrificing and enduring; twining flowers and verdure about the shrine of its idol, while its own heart is desolate and broken.

Original.

THE FLOWER AND THE HUMMING-BIRD.

BY FRANCES S. OSGOOD.

Wild and light as a fawn in flight,

With the glee and the grace of a playful child,
She tripped to the hill's unclouded height,
And the dying day around her smiled.

Sunbeam and breeze were at play with her hair,
(Where a few wild blossoms were braided low.)
 wooing it back from her shoulders fair,
Lighting it up with a golden glow.

And lo! as we gazed on the beautiful girl,
With the joy, that we ever, from grace, derive,
We saw something quiver thro' one soft curl,
And struggle and gleam like a jewel alive!

What can it be? For a moment or two,
It burned with a brilliant ruby-ray,
The next, it shone with the sapphire's blue,
And now with the amethyst's purple play!

What can it be? It is changing still,
To an emerald tint—to the sunshine's glow—
Can the maiden alter her gems at will?
And gift, with wings, each luminous show!

With wings—they are fluttering, tiny and light,
Like those which we fancy the fairies wear—
Ah! look! the treasure has taken flight,
'Twas a humming-bird caught in that golden snare!

Silly rover! you fly from those silken rings,
Where Love—a like prisoner—*Avgs* his chain!
Oh, you never will shut your shining wings
On a flower so rare and sweet again!