

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Rantchewaime

One evening in the spring or early summer of 1824, Mahaskah, or White Cloud, a chief of the Ioway Indians, made camp for the night near the mouth of the Des Moines River. Around him was the prairie with its grassy carpet figured with bright-colored flowers, but Mahaskah, hungry and tired from his journey, was intent upon some venison he had just finished cooking. Suddenly he felt a blow upon his shoulders and turned in astonishment and alarm to see standing there — not a hostile warrior, but one of his wives whom the Indians had named Rantchewaime, meaning Female Flying Pigeon.

“Am I your wife? Are you my husband?” she demanded of the surprised Mahaskah. “If so, I will go with you to the Mawhehunnèche [American big house], and see and shake the hand of Incohonée [great father or president].”

Now Mahaskah had started out alone on a business trip to Washington and other eastern cities and was on his way to join the party of chiefs and warriors who had been invited to visit the President; but Rantchewaime was a beautiful woman and the favorite wife of the chief, so he replied: "Yes, you are my wife; I am your husband; I have been a long time from you; I am glad to see you; you are my pretty wife, and a brave man always loves to see a pretty woman."

Thus did Mahaskah prove himself gallant in love, as he had already proved himself brave in battle, and Rantchewaime, like many another pretty woman, succeeded in getting what she wanted. She was permitted to accompany her husband to Washington, while her three older sisters, also wives of Mahaskah, and his three other wives remained at home on the Des Moines River to plant and harvest the corn, beans, and pumpkins and to care for the children.

The party which Mahaskah and Rantchewaime joined for this trip included General William Clark, Lawrence Taliaferro, George H. Kennerly, Maurice Blondeau, B. Vasquez, Pashepaho, Keokuk and his wife, and Taimah and his wife and daughter. Altogether there were nineteen chiefs and warriors, six interpreters, and four Indian women. These Indians were strangers to life in the cities and the duties of the agents and interpreters who were acting as chaperones were not light.

One night, for example, while the party was stay-

ing in Washington, the agent heard a disturbance in the room assigned to Mahaskah and Rantchewaime. Upon investigation he found that Mahaskah, who had indulged too freely in the white man's fire water, was beating Rantchewaime. When the agent appeared, Mahaskah lifted the window sash and stepped out, forgetting that he was two stories from the ground. The result was a broken arm.

Further details of the trip, so far as Rantchewaime is concerned, apparently were not recorded. On August 4, 1824, Mahaskah and Mahnehahnah, another Ioway chief, signed a treaty with the United States government whereby the Ioway tribe was to relinquish their claim to certain lands in Missouri in return for five hundred dollars in cash and five hundred dollars a year for ten years. Provision was also made for farming utensils, blankets, and cattle.

Rantchewaime, of course, had no part in making this treaty, but it is probable that she saw the "Great Father", for President Monroe held a "talk" with the Indian party and Rantchewaime was not one to miss her cherished desire of meeting "Incohoney". We know also that the beautiful wife of Mahaskah attracted much attention. Her portrait was painted by C. B. King and copies of this painting justify the title, Beautiful Female Eagle That Flies in the Air, occasionally given to Rantchewaime by the Indians although her name signified Female Flying Pigeon.

Upon her return to the Des Moines Valley, Rantchewaime doubtless had much to tell her admiring

and envious friends concerning the wonders she had seen. She did not hesitate to express her disapproval of certain customs of the pale faces and warned the Indian women to avoid these evils.

Indeed, Rantchewaime seems to have been wise and good as well as beautiful. An agent for the Ioways is quoted as saying that she was chaste, mild, gentle, generous, and devoted to her husband. Mahaskah said of her that when the poor came her hand was like a strainer, full of holes, letting all she had pass through. She would give away her last blanket, all the honey in the lodge, the last bladder of bears' oil, or the last piece of dried meat. But even these virtues failed to satisfy the conscience of Rantchewaime, and she frequently blackened her face and retired to some solitary spot to fast and pray to the Great Spirit whom she feared to offend.

After his return to his home Mahaskah built a double log house and determined to follow the advice of the President and cultivate the land. His comfortable existence, however, was soon interrupted by a tragedy. One day, not long after their return from Washington, Mahaskah and Rantchewaime were making a journey across the prairie on horseback, Rantchewaime carrying with her on her horse a young child about four years old. Mahaskah, fearing the presence of hostile Indians, and perhaps also by habit, rode ahead, turning now and then to see whether the woman and child were following. As he crossed a high point at one place on the trail

Mahaskah was surprised to find that Rantchewaime was nowhere in sight. He rode back five or six miles and there found her horse grazing on the prairie. Near-by lay Rantchewaime with her child resting its head upon her body. Mahaskah hurriedly dismounted; but he saw at once that Rantchewaime was dead. Apparently the horse had accidentally thrown his rider at a small precipice and the fall had instantly killed the woman, though the child was unhurt.

When Mahaskah realized that his beautiful wife was really dead he expressed his horror and grief in words which have been translated into English somewhat as follows: "God Almighty! I am a bad man. You are angry with me. The horse has killed my squaw!" Just then the child lifted its head from the mother's dead body and said: "Father, my mother is asleep!"

Mahaskah was alone on the prairie with his child and the body of his dead wife. It was four days before he could reach his lodge and prepare for the funeral. His first duty was to collect the presents which had been given to Rantchewaime at Washington and all her other belongings and put them in the rude box with the body. Then the box was placed on a high scaffold, according to the Indian custom. This method of disposing of the dead had a twofold purpose: it elevated the body as near as possible to the Great Spirit who lived in the sky and also safeguarded it from the wolves. Mahaskah then killed a dog, made a feast, and called his braves to-

gether. A second dog and a horse were killed. The body of this dog was fastened to the scaffold, head upwards. On its head was placed a little tobacco. The body of the horse was placed with the tail near the part of the scaffold on which the head of the dead woman lay.

The Ioway Indians believed that the Great Spirit would approach the scaffold, seeking the spirit of the dead. Upon his appearance, the dog was supposed to address him, show him where the body lay, and invite him to smoke the tobacco. This offer, the Indians thought, would be accepted and the Great Spirit would then reanimate the bodies of the woman, the dog, and the horse. The horse was to bear the woman with her trinkets and other property to the happy hunting ground, where game was plentiful, while the dog was to hunt deer for her.

Thus passed from the world of the living to the land of the dead Rantchewaime, an Iowa matron who typified, without knowing it, the words of the Psalmist: "Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her."

Years afterwards, when the elder Mahaskah was dead, the younger Mahaskah, a son of Rantchewaime, was in Washington on an errand for the tribe. One day he was shown a group of Indian pictures including that of his father whom he at once recognized. In this collection was the picture of a beautiful Indian woman called the Eagle of Delight, wife of Shaumonekusse. The young chief at once

exclaimed, "That is my mother." Nor could he be persuaded otherwise, saying: "Did you ever know the child that loved its mother, and had seen her, that forgot the board on which he was strapped, and the back on which he had been carried, or the knee on which he had been nursed, or the breast that had given him life?" So convinced was young Mahaskah that the picture represented his mother that he refused to leave the room until the name of Rantchewaime was affixed to the picture. "If it had not been for Waucondamony" — Walking God, the name he gave the exhibitor of the pictures — "I would have kissed her", said the son of Rantchewaime, "but Waucondamony made me ashamed."

Later, however, young Mahaskah was taken to the King gallery containing Indian portraits, and there he saw pictures of both the Eagle of Delight and Rantchewaime. At once he realized his mistake. "*That* is my mother", he exclaimed, pointing to Rantchewaime's portrait, "that is her fan! I know her now. I am ashamed again." He asked for a copy of his mother's picture and also for a copy of the portrait of the Eagle of Delight, saying of this, "The Ottoe chief will be so glad to see his squaw, and he will give me one hundred horses for it."

RUTH A. GALLAHER