

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Mahaska

The most distinguished chief of the Ioway Indians during the last years of their sojourn in the State which takes their name was White Cloud, or Mahaska, as he was called in their own tongue. Son of old Mauhawgaw, the Wounding Arrow, the great man who led his tribe into the valley of the Iowa River, Mahaska was distinguished by his physical preëminence as well as his hereditary rank. Six feet and two inches in height, he was said to be a man "of perfect symmetry of person, and of uncommon beauty", characteristically broad of shoulder, deep chested, and muscular yet active like the best warriors of his tribe. Although he was a handsome, personable man, his stern, relentless gaze was at times forbidding. Always purposeful and determined, inured to hardship, disciplined to ignore pain with steely indifference, these qualities imparted a rather grim cast to his countenance in later years.



Like many Indian chiefs of his day, Mahaska found a very formidable foe in John Barleycorn. While he never became a sot like his son, he did sometimes indulge much too freely in the fire-water of the traders.

One of these occasions was on his visit to Washington in 1824. Inflamed by whisky he was engaged in beating his wife when he recognized the voice of the Indian agent outside the room. Wishing to avoid the reprimand he was about to receive, he opened the window and stepped out, forgetting that he was two stories from the ground. The result was a severe shaking up and a broken arm.

This misadventure, though painful, did not deter him from riding at least two miles the next day over rough roads and pavements. A broken arm and a few bruises were things of no great moment to a man accustomed to the wounds and rough surgery of the war party. It was at this time that he sat for his portrait by C. B. King, and his pain, it is said, was responsible for the rather stoical, frowning aspect of his countenance.

Wounding Arrow did not long survive his entrance into the Iowa country. Shortly after establishing his village on the Iowa River, he was visited by a band of Sioux. A pipe was passed around and the Ioway chief was invited to attend a dog-feast, made in honor of the Great Spirit. Mauhawgaw accepted the invitation of the Sioux in good faith, but in the course of the ceremony he was set upon



by his perfidious hosts and slain — not, however, before he had succeeded in killing one man and three women.

The indignation of the Ioways at the outrage was expressed in immediate action. A war party was raised. Mahaska, by virtue of heredity, became the chief of this party, but being young and never having distinguished himself in battle, he refused the command, choosing to take part in the expedition as a common warrior rather than as a leader. Until he gained experience and earned the approbation of his tribe by his individual prowess and achievement on the war-path, he was content to repose the leadership in an older man tried and experienced by many war parties.

The result was a hasty march into the country of the Sioux, a surprise attack, and a decisive victory, as victories were reckoned in such engagements. Ten of the enemy's scalps were taken and Mahaska himself brought home the scalp of the Sioux chief in whose lodge his father was murdered.

In this manner continual warfare was waged between the Sioux and the Ioways. Mahaska, having demonstrated conclusively his ability as a warrior, assumed complete and active command of his tribe, and for many summers thereafter his life was crowded with warlike adventures. In fully eighteen battles he led his warriors and was never defeated. His huge form and mighty war-hatchet were in the thick of every fight. The Ioways, formidable be-



hind the driving force of his powerful attack, gained the respect of all their savage neighbors. Most of these forays were against their inveterate foes, the Sioux and the Osages.

On one occasion, while engaged in an expedition against the Osages, Mahaska camped for a short time with some of his followers on the north bank of the Missouri River. A canoe with three French trappers swept by his leafy resting place. Wishing to cross the river he called out to the Frenchmen to turn back and assist him and his party. For one reason or another, through misunderstanding or fear, the Frenchmen refused. They not only refused but fired upon the Indians, wounding one of Mahaska's braves. Instantly the shot was returned and a Frenchman was killed. Mahaska himself then seized his own gun, remarking "You have killed one of the rascals, I'll see if I can not send another along with him to keep him company to the house of the Black Spirit."

A great outcry followed this act, the news spreading like fire along the border that the Ioways were on the war-path against the settlers. An expedition marched against the Indians. Mahaska was captured and thrust into prison, where he remained many months. He made no resistance as he seemed to feel that he had done no wrong. Finally escaping, he returned to his own country. In later years, when he had settled down to a life of peace, he was prone to express his great regret at having per-



mitted his warriors to fire upon the Frenchmen in retaliation for their assault.

Among the Ioways it was the custom when a husband or brother fell in battle for another brave to adopt their wives or sisters. Upon his return from a campaign Mahaska found four sisters who had lost their protection in that way, so he married all of them. Of these, Rantchewaime became the mother of Mahaska the Younger. She was a woman long remembered by her people for her great beauty, her exemplary life, and her tragic death. In 1824 she accompanied Mahaska to Washington where she attracted much attention for her beauty. Upon their return she helped her husband put into practice the good advice he had received from the President to cultivate the land and follow the path of peace. But this comfortable régime was brief. One day, while riding across the prairie, Rantchewaime was thrown from her pony and instantly killed. Mahaska and all of the Ioways mourned deeply over the tragic death of this generous and noble woman.

At the council in Washington, Mahaska received a medal from President Monroe and signed a treaty whereby the Ioways ceded all their land in Missouri to the United States in return for fifty-five hundred dollars in annuities, blankets, farming implements, and cattle. The government also promised to assist the Indians in their agricultural pursuits.

Mahaska took these negotiations very much to



heart and upon his return to his native prairies he began the task of cultivating his land very earnestly. He built himself a comfortable double log house and adjusted himself to his new life with dispatch and thoroughness in compliance with the wishes of his Great Father.

In the month of August, 1825, a great council was held at Prairie du Chien, composed of the chiefs and warriors of the Sioux, Sac and Fox, Ioway, Chippewa, Menominee, Winnebago, Pottawattamie, Ottawa, and Chippewa nations. The purpose of this conclave was to reconcile these Indian tribes residing on the Mississippi who had been for years involved in constant and destructive wars among themselves over their hunting grounds. General William Clark and Governor Lewis Cass represented the government.

At the head of the Ioway delegation was Mahaska. He had awaited General Clark at the Des Moines Rapids and, supplied with government provisions, proceeded up the Mississippi in a canoe borrowed from the American Fur Company. Having deserted the war-path the year before, he used his influence to establish peace among the tribes.

"My fathers", he said, "I claim no lands in particular. The land I live on is enough to furnish my women and children. I go upon the lands of our friends the Sacs and Foxes — we alternately go upon each other's land. Why should we quarrel about lands when we get enough on what we have?"



"My fathers: the Sacs, Foxes, Winnebagoes, Menominees, and Pottawattamies are links of the same people. I speak for them as well as for myself.

"My fathers: you see people here apparently of different nations but we are all one. You Sacs, Foxes, Winnebagoes, and Menominees, we are but one people. We have but one council fire and eat out of the same dish."

Mahaska, the man of war, the victor in eighteen battles, the inveterate foe of Sioux and Osage since early youth, pleaded the cause of Indian unity. Passing through the land of the white men on his visit to Washington, observing on every hand evidences of their numbers, power, and wealth, Mahaska realized the futility of any resistance. He also seemed to understand the weakness of the red men, and to feel the need of conserving such strength as they might still possess. Further depletion of their numbers by wars among themselves, this man of many war-parties could not condone. Ever after, Mahaska turned his back upon the tomahawk which he had wielded so well in his youth.

In 1833, the son of Crane, one of the subordinate chiefs of the Ioways, was killed by the Omahas. A war party was immediately organized, but when the warriors went to their great chief to secure his leadership in their expedition, Mahaska refused to go. "I have buried the tomahawk", he said, "I am now a man of peace." Nine years had passed since his visit to Washington but the promises made there



were still fixed firmly in his mind. "The treaty made with our Great Father provides for the punishment of such outrages", he declared.

His tribesmen were not of the same mind, however, and an incursion was made into the land of the Omahas, with the result that six scalps were taken. On their return the usual victory feast was prepared and everything was made ready for the scalp dance. Mahaska refused to take part in any of these activities.

His lack of culpability did not prevent him from becoming embroiled in the affair however. The murders having been reported to the government, General William Clark, who was Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, ordered the arrest of the Ioways. The agent of the Ioways, to whom the "Red Head Chief", as he was called by the Indians, assigned this duty, called upon Mahaska and explained his mission. Mahaska, still acting in the spirit of the treaty of 1824, assented. "It is right," he said, "I will go with you."

The guilty Indians were arrested and taken to Fort Leavenworth. While imprisoned there, one of the members of the war party called Mahaska to the window of his cell and said, "Father, if I ever get out of this place alive, I will kill you. A brave man should never be deprived of his liberty, and confined as I am. You should have shot me at the village." The freeborn, prairie-bred Ioway was not comfortable in those close quarters. Chafing at con-



finement, his whole being revolted against his plight and his heart turned against his old leader who had brought him there.

When he escaped at last, true to his promise he forthwith sought out the object of his revenge with a party of others. He found Mahaska encamped on the Nodaway River, about sixty miles from his village. Setting upon their erstwhile leader with "guns, tomahawks, and clubs", they slew him, but not without difficulty. Mahaska, like his father, the old Mauhawgaw, parted with his life dearly. One of his murderers remarked that "he was the hardest man to kill he ever knew."

This unhappy event occurred in the year 1834, when Mahaska was about fifty years old. In such fashion "the greatest man who ever made a moccasin track on the Nodaway" passed from the land of the Ioways, a victim of his loyalty to the pledge made to his "great white brother" to lay down the tools of war and take up the instruments of peace. Ushered into manhood and his career of warfare by the tragedy of his father's death, losing his beautiful and devoted Rantchewaime in an equally tragic accident, his own end was in keeping with this dominant note of his life. The story of Mahaska, the Ioway, is not lacking in the dramatic requirements of an old Greek tragedy.

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