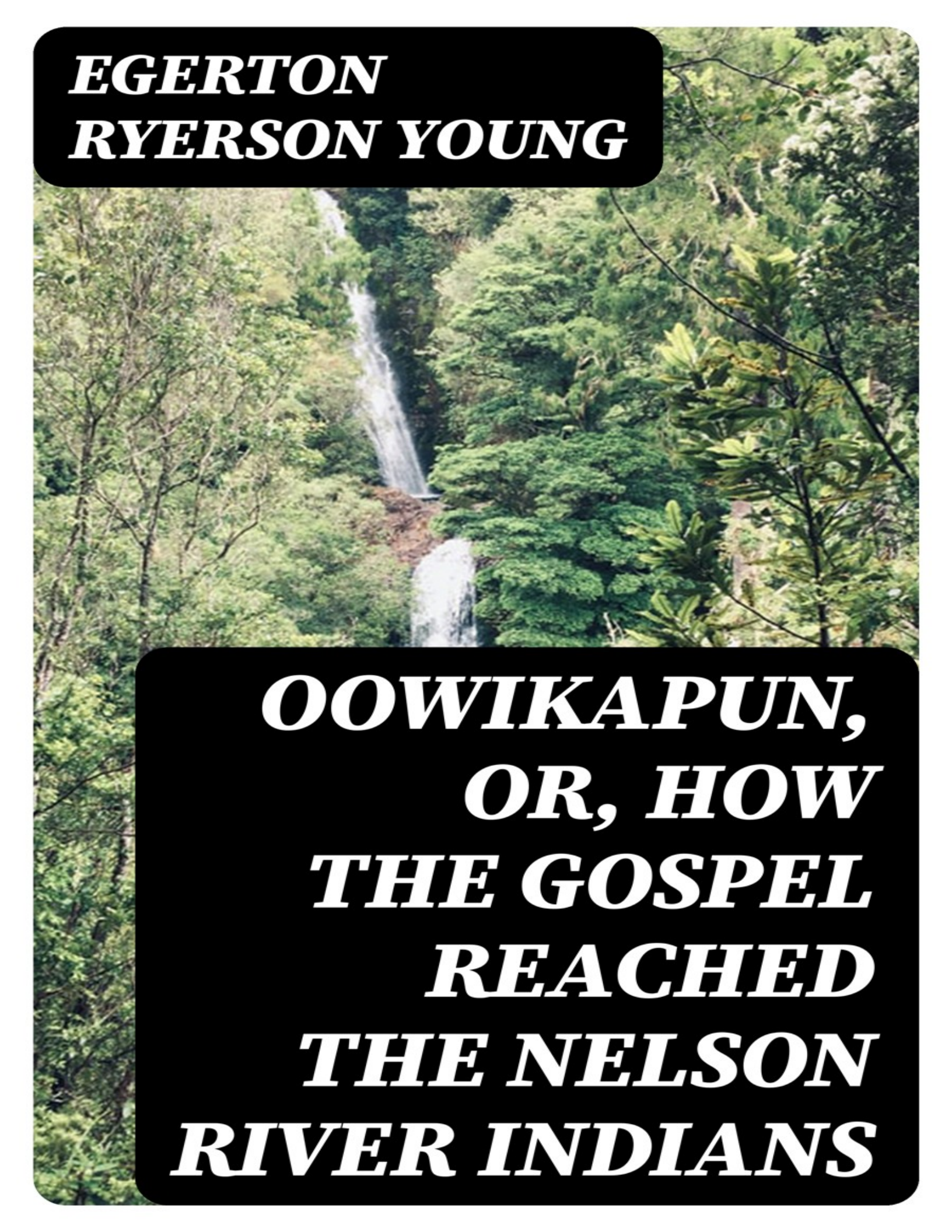




***EGERTON
RYERSON YOUNG***

***OOWIKAPUN,
OR, HOW
THE GOSPEL
REACHED
THE NELSON
RIVER INDIANS***

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Oowikapun, or, How the Gospel reached the Nelson River Indians

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"Oowikapun"

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Chapter One.

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The Wolf Trap.

That Oowikapun was unhappy, strangely so, was evident to all in the Indian village. New thoughts deeply affecting him had in some way or other entered into his mind, and he could not but show that they were producing a great change in him.

The simple, quiet, monotonous life of the young Indian hunter was curiously broken in upon, and he could never be the same again. There had come a decided awakening; the circle of his vision had suddenly enlarged, and he had become aware of the fact that he was something more than he imagined. While, in his simple faith, he had paddled along the beautiful rivers, or wandered through the wild forests of his country, catching the fish or hunting the game, where at times he had heard the thunder's crash and seen the majestic tree riven by the lightning's power, and perhaps in these seasons of nature's wild commotion had "seen God in cloud and heard him in the wind," yet until very lately he had never heard of anything which had caused him to imagine that he was in any way allied to that Great Spirit, or was in any way responsible to him.

What was the cause of this mental disquietude, of these long hours of absorbing thought?

To answer these inquiries we must go back a little, and accompany him on a hunting trip which he made in the forest months ago.

Hearing from some other hunters of a place where grey wolves were numerous, and being ambitious to kill some of these fierce brutes, that he might adorn his wigwam with their warm skins, he took his traps and camping outfit and set out for that region of country, although it was more than two hundred miles away. Here he found tracks in abundance, and so before he made his little hunting lodge in the midst of a spruce grove, he set his traps for the fierce wolves in a spot which seemed to be a rallying place of theirs. As they are very suspicious and clever, he carefully placed two traps close together and sprinkled them over with snow, leaving visible only the dead rabbits which served as bait. Then scattering more snow over his own tracks as he moved away, in order to leave as little evidence of his having been there as possible, he returned to his little tentlike lodge and prepared and ate his supper, smoked his pipe, and then wrapping himself up in his blanket was soon fast asleep. Very early next morning he was up and off to visit his traps. His axe was slipped in his belt, and his gun, well loaded, was carried ready for use if necessary. When he had got within a few hundred yards of the place where he had set his heavy traps, he heard the rattling of the chains which were attached to them, each fastened to a heavy log. This sound, while it made his heart jump, was very welcome, for it meant that he had been successful. When he

drew near the spot where he had set the traps, he found that a fierce old wolf, in trying to get the rabbit from one of them without springing it, had got caught in the other, and although both of his hind legs were held by the sharp teeth of the trap, he had managed to drag it and the heavy log fastened to it to quite a distance.

When Oowikapun drew near, the wolf made the most desperate efforts to escape; but the strong trap held him securely, and the heavy log on the chain made it impossible for him to get far away.

Oowikapun could easily have shot him, but ammunition was dear and the bullet hole in the skin would be a blemish, and the sound of the gun might scare away the game that might be near; so he resolved to kill the wolf with the back of his axe. Better would it have been for him if he had shot him at once. So putting down his gun he took his axe out of his belt and cautiously approached the treacherous brute. The sight of the man so near seemed to fill him with fury, and, unable to escape, he made the most desperate efforts to reach him. His appearance, was demoniacal, and his howls and snarls would have terrified almost anybody else than an experienced, cool-headed hunter.

Oowikapun, seeing what an ugly customer he had to deal with, very cautiously kept just beyond the limits of the fearful plunges which the chain would allow the wolf to make, and keenly watched for an opportunity to strike him on the head. So wary and quick was the wolf that some blows received only maddened without disabling him.

Oowikapun at length, becoming annoyed that he should have any difficulty in killing an entrapped wolf, resolved to

end the conflict at once with a decisive blow; and so with upraised axe he placed himself as near as he thought safe, and waited for the infuriated brute to spring at him. But so much force did the entrapped brute put into that spring that it carried the log attached to the chain along with him, and his sharp, glittering fang-like teeth snapped together within a few inches of Oowikapun's throat, and such was the force of the concussion that he was hurled backward, and ere he could assume the aggressive, the sharp teeth of the wolf had seized his left arm, which he threw up for defence, and seemed to cut down to the very bone, causing intense pain. But Oowikapun was a brave man and cool-headed, so a few blows from the keen edge of the axe in his right hand finished his foe, whose only weapons were his sharp teeth, and he was soon lying dead in the snow; but his beautiful skin was about worthless as a robe on account of the many gashes it had received, much to the annoyance of Oowikapun, who had not dreamed of having so severe a battle.

The traps were soon reset and Oowikapun, with the heavy wolf on his back, set out for his camp. As he had set some smaller traps for minks and martens in a different direction, he turned aside to visit them. This would cause him to return to his camp by another trail. While moving along under his heavy load he was surprised to come across the snowshoe tracks of another hunter. He examined them carefully, and decided that they were made by some person who must have passed along there that very morning, early as it was.

As the trail of this stranger, whoever it could be, was in the direction of the traps which Oowikapun wished to visit, he followed them up. When he reached his traps he found that a mink had been caught in one of them, but the stranger had taken it out and hung it up in plain sight above the trap on the branch of a tree. Then the stranger, putting on fresh bait, had reset the trap. Of course Oowikapun was pleased with this, and delighted that the stranger, whoever he was, had acted so honestly and kindly toward him.

Fastening the mink in his belt he hurried on to his camp as fast as he could under his heavy load, for his wounded arm had begun to swell and was causing him intense pain. His stoical Indian nature would have caused him to withstand the pain with indifference, but when he remembered how the wolf, maddened by his capture, had wrought himself up into such a frenzy that his mouth was all foaming with madness when he made that last desperate spring and succeeded in fastening his fangs in his arm, he feared that perhaps some of the froth might have got into his arm, and unless some remedies were quickly obtained, madness might come to him, to be followed by a most dreadful death.

But what could he do? He was several days' journey from his own village, and many miles from any hunter of his acquaintance. He had, in his vanity, come alone on this hunting expedition, and now alone in the woods, far away from his friends, here he is in his little hunting lodge, a dangerously wounded man.

Fortunately he had taken the precaution of sucking as many of the wounds as he could reach with his mouth, and

then had bound a deerskin thong on his arm above the wound as tightly as he could draw it.

Very few, comparatively, were the diseases among the aboriginal tribes of America before the advent of the white man. Their vocation as hunters, however, rendered them liable to many accidents.

Possessing no firearms, and thus necessarily obliged to come in close contact with the savage beasts in their conflict with them, they were often severely wounded.

Fortunate was it for the injured one if he had companions near when the bone was fractured or the flesh torn. If, when accidents occur, the injuries are not considered very desperate, a little camp is improvised and with a day or two of rest, with some simple remedies from nature's great storehouse—the forest—a cure is quickly effected. If a leg or arm is broken, a stretcher of young saplings is skillfully prepared, interwoven with broad bands of soft bark, and on this elastic, easy couch the wounded man is rapidly carried to his distant wigwam by his companions.

When there are but two persons, and an accident happens to one of them, two young trees that are tough and elastic are used. Then tops of small branches are allowed to remain, and very much diminish the jolting caused by the inequalities of the ground. No carriage spring ever more successfully accomplished its purpose. A couple of cross bars preserve the saplings in position, and the bark of some varieties of shrubs or trees cut into bands and joined to either side forms a comfortable couch. In this way an injured man has often been dragged many miles by his companion, and in some instances it has been found on his arrival at his

forest home that the fractured bones were uniting, and soon the limb was whole again.

With these healthy, simple children of the forest wounds heal with great rapidity and fractured bones soon unite. This reparative power of the Indians when injured is only paralleled by the wonderful stoicism with which they bear injuries, and at times inflict upon themselves the severest torture. With flints as substitutes for lances, they will cut open the largest abscesses to the very bone. They will amputate limbs with their hunting knives, checking the haemorrhage with red-hot stones as was done long years ago by the surgeons of Europe.

With marvellous nerve many a wounded hunter or warrior has been known to amputate his own limb, or sew up with sinew the gaping wounds received in conflict with the hostile foe or savage beast. They were cognisant of the value, and extensively used warm fomentations. If rheumatism or other kindred diseases assailed them, the Turkish bath in a very simple form was often used. Sometimes a close tent of deerskins served the purpose. The patient was put in a little tent where, in a hollow under him, heated stones were placed, over which water was thrown until the confined air was heated to the required temperature and saturated with the steam.

Oowikapun had fortunately broken no bones in his battle with the savage wolf, but he knew that his wounds were dangerous. Some of them were so situated in his arm that he could not reach them with his mouth in order that he might suck out the poisonous saliva of the wolf that he feared might be in them, and it now being in the depth of

winter, he could not obtain the medicinal herbs which the Indians use as poultices for dangerous wounds of this description.

While brooding over his misfortune he suddenly remembered the snowshoe tracks of the stranger, and at once resolved to try and find his lodge, and secure help. To decide was to act. The few preparations necessary were soon made, and taking the most direct route to the spot where he had last seen the trail of the stranger he was soon in it. He was uncertain at first whether to go backward or forward on it in order to reach the wigwam, for he had not the remotest idea whether these tracks led to it or from it. But his native shrewdness came into play to solve the question. First he noticed from the way the shoes sunk in the snow that the man was carrying a heavy load; next he observed that the tracks were not like those of a hunter going out from his home, moving about cautiously looking for game, but were rather those of a man well loaded from a successful hunt, and pushing on straight for home with his burden. Quickly had he read these things and arrived at his conclusions; so he resolved to go on with the trail, and he was not disappointed. He had travelled only a few miles, ere in a pleasant grove of balsam trees, on the borders of a little ice-covered lake, he discovered, by the ascending smoke from the top, the wigwam of his unknown friend.

Without hesitancy he marched up to it, and lifting the large moose skin which served as its only door, he stooped down and entered in. A pleasant fire was burning on the ground in the centre, and partly circled around it was the Indian family. As though Oowikapun had been long looked

for as an expected, honoured guest, he was cordially welcomed in quiet Indian style and directed to a comfortable place in the circle, the seat of the stranger. The pipe of peace was handed to him, and but few words were spoken until he had finished it.

Indian eyes are sharp, even if at times words are few; and it was not many minutes before the owner of the wigwam saw that something was wrong, and so he drew from him the story of the killing of the wolf and his fears that perhaps all the froth from his teeth had not been rubbed off by the leather shirt and other covering through which they had passed as they pierced into his arm.

If Oowikapun had travelled a thousand miles he could not have been more fortunate than he was in the man to whom he had gone; for this man was Memotas, the best Indian doctor in all that vast country, who, when his hunting seasons were over, spent his time in studying the medicinal qualities of the roots and herbs of the country which the Good Spirit had created for some good purpose, and then in being a benediction and a blessing to the afflicted ones by their use among them, with but very little fee or reward, as a general thing, in return.

Quickly did Memotas apply his remedies, both external and internal, for he knew the risks the man was running; and he gently insisted on his remaining in his wigwam as his guest for several days until he was recovered from his wounds. He would not even hear of his going to visit his traps, for fear of his heating his blood by the vigorous exercise, and thus aggravating the wounds. So Memotas himself looked after them, and several times returned with

rich spoils of fur-bearing animals, which he gladly handed over to the grateful man.

These great kindnesses completely won the heart of Oowikapun, who considered himself very fortunate in finding so kind a friend in his hours of need. The kind-hearted wife of Memotas was also interested in Oowikapun, and did all she could to add to his comfort and hasten his recovery. The injured man had been surprised at the kindness and respect which Memotas constantly manifested toward her, and was amazed that he often asked her advice. He did not, as the married men with whom Oowikapun was acquainted, treat her unkindly, nor even consider her as much inferior to himself.

While Memotas's wife, whose Indian name was Meyooachimowin, was very industrious, and kept her wigwam and her children tidy and clean, yet she was never considered as merely a drudge and a slave and left to do all the heavy work. Strange to say, she was not allowed to cut the wood in the forest and then drag it home. Neither did she carry the heavy buckets of water up from the lake, as other Indian women were accustomed to do. Nor did she go out into the woods, perhaps miles away, and carry home on her back the deer which her husband had shot. Memotas never would allow her to do anything of the kind. He did all this himself, and seemed even anxious to save her from fatigue and toil. Then when the meals were prepared she was not gruffly sent away to wait until the men had eaten, but with them and the children she sat down on terms of perfect equality.

Then, as regards the children, a boy and girl, whom they called Meyookesik and Sagastao, he noticed that the girl was just as much loved and petted as the boy, and even as kindly treated. This was a state of affairs entirely unknown in the wigwams of the pagan Indians. There the boys are petted and spoiled and early taught to be proud and haughty, and to consider that all girls and women, even their own sisters and mother, are much inferior to them, and only worthy of their kicks and contempt. The boys get the best of everything and are allowed to eat with the men first; while the poor women and girls have to wait until they are finished, and then be content with what is left, often not much; and even then they have to struggle with the dogs for the fragments. The result is they are often half starved.

Chapter Two.

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A Contrast.

Oowikapun was bewildered at the marvellous contrast between what he had been accustomed to witness in the wretched wigwams and lives of his own people and what he here saw in this bright little tent of Memotas. It was all so new and strange to him. Everybody seemed so happy. There were no rude words said by the boy to his mother and no tyrannising over his sister. With equal affection Memotas treated Meyookesik and Sagastao, and great indeed was his kindness and attention to his wife. At first Oowikapun's old prejudices and defective education as regards women